
Fit for a Duke
Dangerous Dukes
WENDY SOLIMAN

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Wendy Soliman

Dangerous Dukes Series

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The Author – Wendy Soliman

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Chapter One

‘I can scarce believe he has agreed to come!’ Beth exclaimed, clapping her hands with delight. ‘He never shows himself anywhere. The entire *ton* has quite despaired of ever getting the reclusive duke to show his face in society, as is his duty.’

‘Of course he will come, my love,’ Lady Fletcher said, smiling broadly at her daughter. ‘How could he possibly decline my invitation? I am, after all, a close friend of his dear mama’s, and I saw young Lord Ezra, as he was at the time, frequently during his childhood. I watched him grow up, truth to tell. He and his friends ran quite wild and were always getting into scrapes.’ Lady Fletcher smiled at the memory. ‘Such high spirits as ever you could imagine. But then Lord Ezra was permitted more freedom than his elder brothers. As the youngest of three boys, no one ever assumed that he would become the duke.’

‘Why did he? Become the duke, that is, Aunt?’ Clio asked.

‘Well, my love, it was all terribly sad. Freddie, the eldest, was always a sickly child. His birth was a difficult one and he wasn’t expected to survive, but he showed the true Delaney fighting spirit and defied everyone. He was cosseted, of course, because he was never strong. He wasn’t sent away to school and every care was taken with his welfare.’

‘That must have been difficult for him, to be denied the rite of passage that all young gentlemen enjoy, if that is the right way to describe experiencing those brutal bastions of learning,’ Adele said. ‘Mixing with their peers, forging friendships and that sort of thing is important though. Even I can see that.’

‘Riding spirited horses and getting into scrapes is just as important,’ Clio added.

‘I don’t know about that, my dears, but I do know that Lord

Freddie understood his duty and was prepared to assume the dukedom when the time came. Sadly it never did.'

'What happened to the next brother?' Beth asked. 'I have never heard anyone refer to it.' She rolled her eyes mischievously. 'It's shrouded in secrecy, as though the family are ashamed of Lord Richard.'

'Far from it,' Lady Fletcher replied. 'The fact of the matter is that Lord Richard died as the result of a silly accident. He had over-imbibed, as young men are wont to do. I cannot say that I approve. No good ever comes of riotous behaviour. However, be that as it may, these things happen. I think he and his friends were indulging in dares that got out of hand and—'

'What sort of dares?' Clio and Adele asked together. Their gazes clashed and they burst out laughing, their lively imaginations perfectly attuned.

'Really, girls, it is no laughing matter. The poor boy lost his life, falling from…well, something.' She flapped a bejewelled hand. 'I am not entirely sure of the particulars. Poor Lord Freddie had caught a fever and pre-deceased his father and Lord Richard had become the new Duke of Wickham, that much I do know. He did not assume that exalted position for long though, and Lord Ezra—who considered himself footloose and fancy free and was enjoying that situation immensely—returned from Waterloo, having helped to put that wretched little Frenchman firmly in his place once and for all, and found himself the new duke.'

'You make that sound like a bad thing, Mama,' Beth said. 'It is very sad that both of his brothers died, but surely Lord Ezra—whom I suppose we must now refer to as 'his grace'—will want to do his duty and uphold his family's honour.'

'Oh, I dare say he does my love,' Lady Fletcher replied, pinching Beth's cheek, 'and I am equally sure he will find his burden far easier to bear with the right wife by his side. And once he sees you, the matter will be all but settled, I am absolutely sure of it.'

'Oh, Mama!' Beth lowered her eyes and a gentle blush touched her cheeks. 'It may come to nothing. We had best not get our hopes up only to have them dashed.'

Clio fought the urge to laugh at such an unconvincing display of reticence. But then again, Beth *was* a vision and had been praised for her looks and good nature since the cradle. There had never been any question that she would make a spectacular marriage, and Clio accepted that Beth had little to be modest about.

‘His grace holds me in great affection and knows that I shall not permit the matrons to throw their charges at him during the course of my house party.’ Lady Fletcher shook her head, causing her multiple chins to wobble somewhat alarmingly. Clio knew her aunt didn’t consider throwing Beth in the duke’s path as coercion since no one, in her biased opinion, could possibly resist her elder daughter’s charms once they had been brought to his attention. A mother, she never tired of reminding the girls, had a duty in that regard. She insisted that it would save the dear duke from the tedium of trawling through a throng of eligible parties. ‘The poor man deserves to enjoy himself without having to watch his step the entire time.’

‘Besides,’ Adele added with a mischievous smile that she shared with Clio, ‘you are so lovely, Beth, that I dare say the disagreeable duke will take one look at you, fall madly in love and then all his troubles will be over.’

‘I am sure he is anything but disagreeable,’ Lady Fletcher chided, smiling at her younger daughter as she did so. ‘However, I cannot help holding out hope with regard to Beth. Indeed, my love, your sister does not exaggerate. You are indeed so beautiful and so accomplished and biddable and…well, I am sure the duke will be enchanted.’

‘She is fit for a duke in all respects,’ Clio dutifully agreed.

Everything that Lady Fletcher had just said was the truth. She had simply forgotten to add that Beth had difficulty in stringing two intelligible sentences together. Not that it signified. She was so amiable that no one held her lack of intellect against her. Indeed, ladies were not expected to be clever, and girls like Clio who were blessed with enquiring minds and a love of learning were actively discouraged from displaying those traits in front of gentlemen for fear of alarming them. Gentlemen, it was generally agreed, disliked being eclipsed by the weaker sex.

Clio would try very hard over the course of the upcoming party to remember her place and not say anything too intelligent. She had never attended such a splendid event before. The duke’s acceptance, which Lady Fletcher had managed to drop into every conversation she had with her peers, had ensured that everyone else who had received an invitation had accepted, and the huge house would be full to capacity for the first time since her uncle’s death.

The future of the reclusive Duke of Wickham, his appearance, his habits and mannerisms had been endlessly speculated upon by the ladies of the house, as had his need for a wife. Everyone agreed that he had a duty to procreate and could not procrastinate indefinitely in that regard. As a student of human nature, Clio was greatly looking

forward to observing his behaviour. She wondered if he was a sensible man, lacking in pride, but suspected that the opposite was more likely to be true. Great men, in her limited experience, were full of self-importance. They were impatient, rude, and rode roughshod over the feelings of others.

'Well, my dears, there is still so much to do. Beth, the seamstress will be here directly to put the finishing touches to your ballgown. You should make yourself ready for her arrival. Indeed, I shall stay with you, just in case my advice is required. We really ought to order you another walking gown as well, just in case we have rain and your hem gets muddy. It really wouldn't do to…'

Lady Fletcher's voice faded as she and Beth walked away, continuing to talk of Beth's wardrobe. Beth made occasional animated contributions to a subject that held her entire attention almost exclusively.

'Phew!' Adele flopped back on the settee she occupied, able to relax her rigid posture now that her mama had left the small salon she and Clio had hidden themselves away in, in the hope of avoiding the perpetual talk of the duke's imminent arrival. They had failed in that endeavour when first Beth and then Lady Fletcher had tracked them down. 'I'm sure that the great man will be high in the instep and find fault with everything he sees.'

'I cannot imagine how anyone could fault this sumptuous mansion,' Clio replied, referring to Windgates, the Fletcher residence that was buried in the heart of the tranquil Hampshire countryside. 'Your mother and those who went before her had exquisite taste. From my observations of the various houses I have been farmed out to before my aunt generously took me in, the possession of a fortune and refined taste seldom go hand in hand. Ostentatious displays of wealth in an effort to outdo one's neighbours seem to be more in vogue.'

'I keep forgetting about your nomadic existence,' Adele replied. 'It cannot have been easy for you, never being able to put down roots.'

'You make me sound like a dandelion, carried on the breeze,' Clio commented.

Adele giggled. 'Sorry. Bad choice of words, but you know what I mean.'

'I do, but I am settled here now, and your mama is very gracious to put up with me.'

'We are cousins and you have saved my sanity, so it is I who should be grateful to you.' Adele flipped through the pages of Beth's discarded copy of *La Belle Assemblee* and, shaking her head, threw it

aside again with an impatient sigh. Clio knew that like her, her cousin would prefer to immerse herself in the political pages of the day's newspaper but would be scolded by her mama if she was caught following current affairs. 'We shall watch the duke being charmed by Beth's lack of guile and amuse ourselves as we observe all the disappointed misses who had planned to beat her to the spoils.'

'I feel almost sorry for the poor man,' Clio said, shuddering.

'Save your sympathy, my dear. I dare say he is perfectly capable of defending himself against the wiles of a few silly females. Besides, I gather his manners are not all that they could be. I have heard that he delivered Lady Marlow the cut direct in the street just last week.'

Clio raised a brow. 'Taking gossip at face value. That isn't like you.'

Adele smiled. 'True, but I dislike Lady Marlow intensely and I so desperately *want* it to be true. She is rude and forthright *and* she has a daughter the same age as Beth to marry off. Of course, she could have been married long since. I hear she has rejected several eligible offers, or more likely her mama has not permitted her to accept them because she is holding out for someone higher.'

'The duke, one assumes. I have heard Beth remark often enough that he is beyond compare in terms of eligible gentlemen and we both know that she is an authority on the subject of eligibility.'

'Precisely. Mama has invited Lady Marlow and the insipid Lady Cora to the party, goodness knows why. I suspect that Lady Marlow subtly petitioned for an invitation, and she is so influential within the *ton* that only a man of the duke's ilk would dare to defy her.' Adele chuckled. 'I hope you shall not mind the sight of blood being spilled *if* Beth beats Lady Cora to the spoils.'

'You have just given me a good reason to wish Beth well in that endeavour, even if he is curmudgeonly. And if she does succeed then your own future will be assured and you will not have to submit yourself to this rigmarole when you come out next year.'

'We come out together!' Adele protested. 'We agreed on that point most specifically, and I shall not release you from your promise. I cannot survive the process without you. Together we can laugh at the absurdities. Alone, I would likely give offence and say something outrageous that would displease Mama. I cannot take society seriously, but you know as well as I that the prospect of launching Beth and me has kept Mama going since our father died at Waterloo. I cannot deprive her of that pleasure.'

Clio's expression sobered. 'Yes, I do know that, which is why you

and I should do all we can to promote the match between Beth and the duke, however disagreeable we might find him. If your mama has the pleasure of seeing her elder daughter become a duchess, then she will not mind quite so much what you do.'

'We can but hope,' Adele said without much optimism.



Ezra Delaney, the Duke of Wickham, whose acceptance of Lady Fletcher's invitation had created so much speculation, yawned behind his hand as he dismounted from Pharaoh, a lively black stallion and recent acquisition with whom he was enjoying an equally lively battle of wills. An early morning mist enshrouded Hyde Park, making it hard for Ezra to discern the presence of the gentlemen awaiting them there and spooking Pharaoh, who pranced sideways and snorted as Ezra tied his reins to a low branch.

'It's only a little fog,' he chided. 'Don't be so dramatic.'

'That beast will be the death of you yet,' his friend Henry Fryer predicted.

'It is not me who should be contemplating an early demise,' Ezra replied. 'Are you absolutely sure about this fiasco?'

'No choice in the matter,' Henry replied cheerfully. 'Carstairs called me out and a gentleman cannot ignore a thrown gauntlet. It simply isn't done. Anyway, I want to prove my undying love for Miss Hardwick.'

The irony of that statement wasn't lost on Ezra, who shivered. 'Unless you die first,' he pointed out. 'Besides, she won't know that you two idiots are fighting for her favours.'

'Of course she will have heard. You are out of touch. Anything as salacious as a duel can never remain secret.'

'Whether she knows or not is beside the point. Carstairs is a crack shot by all accounts.'

Henry straightened his shoulders. 'I am not too shabby myself.'

'Which is why this entire affair is so ridiculous, to say nothing of unlawful.'

'Look on the bright side, Ezra. If we get arrested then you will have a perfect excuse not to attend the house party you haven't stopped complaining about. I still have no idea why you find parties so objectionable.'

‘It’s not the party that I mind.’

‘Yes, sorry, I keep forgetting how eligible you’re supposed to be.’

Ezra laughed in spite of himself. ‘I wish I could forget it.’

‘Never mind. There are some attractive chits amongst this year’s debutantes. Beth Fletcher is a case in point. You could do a lot worse. I am sure that having her warming your bed as you beget a nursery full of heirs will be no great hardship.’

‘Don’t you ever take anything seriously?’

‘Not if I can possibly help it. You seem convinced that I am about to meet my maker, so there’s not a lot of point in fretting about it.’

Ezra shook his head, well aware that he had been bested by his friend’s irrepressible good humour. He extended a hand to those who awaited them as they reached the appointed spot.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘have we exhausted all avenues of mitigation in this affair?’

‘We have,’ Henry and Carstairs said simultaneously.

‘Very well. Do we have a physician present?’

An elderly man with stooped shoulders and unsteady legs who had obviously been bribed to attend and looked as though he would benefit from the attentions of a doctor himself, stepped forward. His breath smelt of whisky.

‘Is that the best we can do?’ Ezra asked in a quiet aside to Carstairs’ second. The man shrugged, seemingly unconcerned.

‘Very well then.’ Ezra sighed. ‘Pistols at twenty paces.’ The pistols were produced by Carstairs’ second.

‘I say! Mighty fine weapons,’ Henry enthused.

‘Like ’em, do you?’ Carstairs replied. ‘Handed down from the grandfather, don’t you know.’

‘Civil of you to provide them.’

‘It was the least I could do.’

Ezra marvelled at the casually polite exchange between two men who were intent upon blowing one another’s brains out. If this was the way that society settled disputes, Ezra congratulated himself upon having little taste for the rigmarole. The combatants chose their weapons while chatting amiably about the forthcoming house party that Henry had just referred to.

Ezra glanced at Carstairs’ second, wondering if he too found the entire situation ridiculous, but the man behaved as though it was the most natural thing in the world. For all the animosity that didn’t exist

between Henry and Carstairs, the two of them could be passing the time of day at White's or sitting down to a game of cards. Ezra wanted to knock their heads together and tell them not to be ridiculous. He himself had not had the pleasure of making Miss Hardwick's acquaintance but was absolutely sure that she wasn't worth dying for.

'Back to back, gentlemen,' he said, when he could no longer avoid carrying out his duties as second, 'make your paces, turn and fire.'

Ezra's heart was in his mouth as he watched his friend's confident stride. Henry was much more than a mere friend to Ezra and he didn't know how he would manage without him. They had been inseparable since their childhood days when they caused havoc on the Wickham estate, playing tricks on gardeners and keepers alike, falling from trees and breaking bones in tumbles from ponies.

Eton and Oxford followed, then the horrors of the war against Napoleon.

They had come through their escapades with barely a scratch to show for it. Could Henry's romantic nature finally be his undoing? Miss Hardwick was the third lady whom Henry had fallen desperately and irrevocably in love with that season alone, and his passions never endured.

Ezra, finding himself unexpectedly in the position of stepping into his dead brother's shoes, had been in mourning for his father and brother and therefore had a valid excuse to avoid society. The only disadvantage was that he hadn't been on hand to steer Henry clear of dangerous romantic waters.

Ezra had spent the two years since Waterloo hiding himself away and getting to grips with his inherited duties. Even his mother, hard to gainsay and determined to see her son married, could not fault the show of respect that Ezra demonstrated for a man he had neither liked nor respected. His father had been profligate, scattering bastard children carelessly in his wake after every liaison he'd entered into and showing little or no affection towards his wife. He was renowned for his wild behaviour and yet got away with it without criticism simply because he was a duke.

A leader in an elevated position who had failed in his duty to enhance the status of the aristocracy as a whole.

Ezra was determined to plough a very different path, which is why he would not enter into a suitable yet loveless marriage, as his father before him had done. But finding someone he would be willing to spend the rest of his life with without feeling the urge to stray was likely to be challenging.

And a decision he would be willing to defer indefinitely.

But, he thought, sighing, he was approaching thirty and the time had come. This summer, he would do the round of the house parties and make a choice before he died of boredom.

He absolutely would.

The sound of shots and the lingering smell of cordite in the air brought Ezra's thoughts back to the here and now. Both men had fired and Ezra had been too withdrawn to even notice. Both were still standing. And yet blood spurted on the white of Carstairs' shirt and Henry swore as he clutched his arm.

Upon closer inspection, neither man appeared to be seriously injured. The doctor shook his head, swigged from a flask that he produced from his pocket, returned to his carriage and had it drive off without even bothering to attend to their wounds.

'Did we pay him?' Ezra asked Carstairs' second. 'If so, we should demand a refund.'

'They are neither of them badly hurt,' the man replied, nodding towards the combatants, who had just shaken hands and agreed that the matter had been honourably settled. They then proceeded to compare wounds. Even Ezra couldn't help laughing as he bound the scratch on Henry's arm with a handkerchief.

'If you were aiming for his heart then you are an even worse shot than I realised,' Ezra said as he and Henry walked away, remounted and rode off in search of breakfast.

'I was aiming at the ground,' Henry replied cheerfully, 'but my hand shook.'

'Firing at the sky too good for you?'

'I wanted to be original. And I might have missed.'

Ezra laughed. 'Let's go to Grosvenor Square,' he said. 'My servants will have prepared breakfast for one. I wasn't sure if you would be joining me or your maker, and it doesn't do to waste good food. But I dare say they can rustle up some coddled eggs if you work that famous charm of yours that seems so effective with the ladies—with Miss Hardwick at any rate.'

'I say, she's an angel,' Henry replied, bouncing enthusiastically in his saddle and causing his horse to prance sideways. 'That's why I couldn't permit Carstairs to become all proprietorial when she assures me that nothing has been settled between them. Indeed, I don't think she even likes him very much—which is a terrible shame because he's a fine fellow.'

‘The same fine fellow you tried to put a bullet through ten minutes ago?’

‘I keep telling you, I fired into the ground.’

‘Is there anyone you take an actual dislike to?’ Ezra asked.

‘Not if I can help it. Animosity is such a negative emotion. Quite exhausting. I much prefer to see the good in everyone and if I can’t find any then I simply ignore them. You should try it.’

‘Perhaps I shall.’

‘Ha!’ Henry threw back his head and roared with laughter. ‘That I should like to see. You have such a taciturn disposition that you only ever see a person’s faults.’

‘It’s safer that way. One is less likely to be disappointed, as you will be when Miss Hardwick settles her interest elsewhere.’

‘Never!’

Ezra rode on, dwelling upon the pressing reason he had for mixing in society that had nothing to do with finding a wife; a reason that he hadn’t even shared with Henry yet, and might never do so. His priority was to discover who had killed his brother and passed it off as an accident. More expediently, he needed to discover who was responsible for the two attempts that had already been made on his own life.

Someone, it seemed, was determined to kill off all the male heirs to the Wickham duchy. Ezra was the only survivor and a crowded house party would give the perpetrator the perfect opportunity to strike again.



Chapter Two

Clio and Adele peered out of an upstairs window as the first carriages pulled up in front of the entrance portico. Lady Fletcher's butler greeted the guests with stately aplomb and showed them into the house while an army of servants descended upon their luggage. Clio's aunt awaited them in the drawing room but neither of her daughters were with her. Beth had been ordered to remain in her chamber. She would make her entrance that evening, when all the male guests would be assembled to admire her, which meant that Adele couldn't show her face prematurely either. Clio and Adele had no arguments to make on that score and were happy to steer well clear of the orderly mayhem of arrival.

'That must be the ducal carriage,' Adele said, pointing to a cream landau conveyed by four matching high-stepping greys.

'Is that the duke?' Clio asked, wrinkling her nose as she watched a short man wave away the footman who had stepped forward so that he could help a lady, obviously the dowager duchess, from the conveyance himself. He made an unnecessary display of so doing, Clio thought, as though attempting to assert his authority. Even from her vantage point Clio could see that he was bandy-legged and running to fat. He held a lace-trimmed handkerchief beneath his nose in one hand, as though affected by the country smells, and offered the other arm to the dowager, who placed a gloved hand on it. 'If so, I cannot understand what all the fuss is about. There is absolutely nothing remarkable about him, and I feel sorry for Beth if he is the man she is destined to spend the rest of her life with.'

'Of course there is everything remarkable about him, silly. He's a duke, and his grand position transcends any unfortunate traits of nature. But no, he is not the duke. I have never seen him, but am reliably informed…'

'By Beth,' they said together, laughing.

‘Quite.’

‘She hasn’t seen this person either,’ Clio pointed out.

‘Which will not have prevented her from learning everything there is to know about the man. Besides, we must assume that the dowager duchess knows her own son, and she has informed Mama that he is of above average height, with a sweep of thick black hair and deep blue eyes.’

‘Then unless she has grievously misled my aunt, the gentleman we are failing to admire cannot be the duke,’ Clio said, looking down on thinning brown hair and seeing a bald spot on top of the man’s head when he removed his hat before entering the house. ‘I am glad for Beth’s sake.’

‘Almost certainly not. I am sure Beth would have heard if the duke was short and bow-legged.’

‘Perhaps, but would that be enough to deter her?’

Adele shook her head, smiling. ‘Very likely not. Anyway, I believe that this man is the dowager duchess’s nephew, her late sister’s only son. I have heard it said that he made himself indispensable to the duchess after Lord Richard died. The current duke was away with the army at the time and when Lord Ezra returned he found Mr Conway installed at Wickham Hall, where he has remained ever since.’

‘I see. One assumes that he is not married.’

‘Presumably not.’

‘And that he recognises an opportunity when he sees one.’

Clio pressed her nose against the window glass, watching from her vantage point as Mr Conway spent at least a minute emphasising a point to Pearson, waving the hand clutching the handkerchief in the air in added emphasis. Pearson remained impassive as the tirade continued.

‘How very ill-mannered,’ Clio remarked. ‘I wonder why the dowager doesn’t put a stop to it.’

Pearson was an excellent butler and did not require to be lectured on his duties, certainly not by a dependent relative. Clio knew he would take offence but would not permit his displeasure to show—at least not publicly. She smiled, thinking that Mr Conway might well have to wait a considerable time for his bell to be answered, and wondered why those with the least authority were almost always the ones most inclined to throw their weight about. An innate feeling of inferiority, no doubt, at least insofar as Mr Conway was concerned and she knew that she would not like the man.

‘I imagine he has no money of his own and is dependent upon the current duke’s largesse,’ Clio said. ‘But still, if he entertains the dowager and keeps her amused, I don’t suppose the duke will mind too much. I suspect that the lady is anxious to see her only remaining son married and that naturally the duke resents the pressure, so a dependent male cousin who is willing to flatter his mother is probably just the distraction he requires. I wonder where he is—the duke that is—and why he was not here to escort his mama.’

‘He is a very close friend of the Viscount Fryer. I hear they are inseparable, or at least they were before the duke’s status changed. Henry Fryer has accepted his own invitation to this party and his mother arrived just before the duchess, so I expect Lord Fryer and the duke will be arriving together.’

‘Well, if they don’t get here soon they will miss both dinner and Beth’s grand entrance.’

‘Oh dear.’ Adele grinned. ‘That will never do. Speaking of which, we had best think about dressing ourselves, otherwise we will be the ones arriving late and making an entrance. Don’t forget that we promised not to put ourselves forward so that Beth would have the chance to shine.’

‘As if we could steal the limelight from her! Well, you could, in fairness, since you are equally pretty, but there is nothing memorable about me.’

‘Fishing for compliments, dearest?’

‘Just being pragmatic, my love,’ Clio replied. ‘Nothing other than my wealth is likely to appeal to the gentlemen here today, but since I am neither officially out nor on the prowl for a husband, I shall not let that trivial detail concern me. Instead I shall enjoy observing the jockeying for position and favour once the duke arrives.’

‘One does not have to be out to join in the festivities at a house party. That is rather the point of them. They offer a useful means for those without sufficient funds to give a daughter a season an opportunity to expediently marry her off.’

‘Now who’s being pragmatic?’

Adele grinned. ‘Practical, more like.’

The girls hugged and went to their separate rooms, where maids awaited them with hot water and gowns prepared for the big night.

‘What a hubbub below stairs, miss,’ Daisy, Clio’s maid, said, looking agitated. ‘I ain’t never seen so many grand servants, nor so much activity neither. Everyone making demands and pulling rank and Mr Pearson keeping order as smoothly as the workings of a well-

oiled clock and never looking flustered. I don't know how he does it, indeed I don't. Those retainers of the duke's terrify me.'

'Do they put on airs and throw their weight around?'

'Actually no but…well, I find them daunting.'

Clio nodded, aware that status was every bit as important below stairs as it would be later in her aunt's drawing room. 'Do not allow them to intimidate you, Daisy,' she said.

'Oh, I don't feel intimidated. Well,' she added, looking vague, 'I don't think I do, but that Mr Godfrey, the duke's valet, he's a right charmer.' Daisy's cheeks turned bright pink.

'I see,' Clio said, smiling.

Daisy poured water into the ewer and helped Clio out of her gown. 'You will have to get a move on, miss. You've left it late. The duke ain't arrived yet but Mr Godfrey says he'll be here directly. He's riding down with his friend, Lord Fryer. Lady Fletcher is worried that they won't get here in time for dinner so she's held it back for an hour. Even so, you will be expected downstairs at the usual time.'

'Then I had best be there.' Not that anyone other than Adele and her aunt would notice if she was not, but even so, her aunt had taken her in and been kind to her. It was a great relief to be settled, no longer passed around between relatives like an inconvenient parcel. This party was hugely important to Lady Fletcher and Clio would play her small supporting role in proceedings dutifully. 'You know it doesn't take me long to get ready.'

'It will tonight. I intend to dress your hair properly.'

'Oh lud, I thought you had abandoned that idea. My hair will always do precisely as it pleases no matter what you attempt, and well you know it. Besides, it is not as if I am trying to impress anyone.'

Daisy ignored Clio's complaints, just as she always did when Clio said something she didn't want to hear. Sometimes Clio wondered who was in charge of whom, but Daisy was so dear to her that she would never dispense with her services. Young yet fiercely loyal, Daisy and Clio had been together through the worst of times. She was an excellent lady's maid and completely dependable.

Less than an hour later, turned out in turquoise silk that complimented the colour of her strawberry blonde hair, Clio was ready with time to spare. Some guests were already in the drawing room and no doubt spilling out onto the terrace to enjoy the last of the day's fine weather. Clio heard cultured voices coming from that direction but had no desire to join the fray just yet. Adele took longer than she did to get ready, so Clio wandered into the grounds, enjoying

the mild breeze, taking care to avoid the places where she might be seen from the terrace and have her purpose questioned. Worse still, she might find that she had company foisted upon her before she was ready to accept it.

Feeling guilty for her taciturn disposition when she had so much to be grateful to Lady Fletcher for, Clio turned her face to the setting sun, determined to enjoy her moment of rebellion. Beth would be appalled to see her risking her complexion for no good reason, but since Clio already had a healthy dose of freckles decorating her nose that she didn't attempt to conceal, she didn't see much point in exercising caution.

'What cannot be cured must be endured,' she said aloud.

A commotion coming from the direction of the duck pond drew her attention. Curious as to its cause, she strolled in that direction and saw a large shaggy dog making clumsy attempts to capture a group of ducklings that had paddled to safety in their mother's wake. In the centre of the pond, they circled in an untidy gaggle, taunting the poor dog.

'Who are you?' she asked, scratching the mutt's ears and wondering what breed he was. Not one that she recognised. Confident that none of the elegant guests would possess such a scruffy animal, she wondered how he came to be in the grounds. It was quite a way to come from the village. Clio considered his lack of discernible breeding a point in his favour, but she knew that her view would be very much in the minority. 'Where did you come from, boy? You look too well fed to be a stray.'

She stood back, aware of her fine clothing as the dog shook water from his coat, barked once and loped off with an ungainly stride in the direction of the stables. For want of something better to do—her only alternative was the drawing room which distinctly lacked appeal—Clio followed along at a leisurely pace. She stopped in her tracks when she heard low voices coming from the tack room. The voices were too cultured to belong to any of the grooms, all of whom were run off their feet caring for the guests' horses, which had quadrupled the occupancy of the stalls.

The dog wagged his tail and disappeared into the stables. Clio drew closer and leaned against the outside wall of the tack room, eavesdropping unashamedly.

'It will have to happen here,' the dominant voice said. 'There will never be a better opportunity. All that remains to be determined is the choice of weapon.'

Clio clasped a hand over her mouth to prevent a startled cry from

emerging. Someone had come to this party with the intention of doing another person harm, that much was immediately obvious to her. But who was speaking? Whom should she warn? Lady Fletcher was the dearest aunt imaginable but she was afraid of her own shadow and even the suggestion of a murderous plot would give her a fit of the vapours. Never had Clio felt the lack of a competent man's presence so keenly. She felt panic welling up inside her and adjured herself to remain calm. No one knew what she had overheard, and that gave her an advantage of sorts. If she could just find out a few more details, she would have a better idea of how to act.

Possibly.

'Perhaps Lord Fryer would…'

'Leave him out of it, Godfrey!'

'Godfrey? Wasn't that the name of the duke's valet that Daisy had just mentioned? Clio's hands trembled. The person doing the talking spoke with such authority that she would have reached the conclusion that he was the duke even without Godfrey's name pointing her in the right direction. His voice was deep, vibrant and earthy—a voice it would be hard to grow tired of listening to—were it not for the fact that he appeared to be a murderer.

Clio leaned against the wall, mindless of her delicate satin snagging against the rough wood, and pondered upon her dilemma. As far as she knew, no other male guests had yet to arrive and those that were here were either changing for dinner or socialising in the drawing room. Clio didn't allow many things to daunt her, but an influential duke intent upon murder…She would be no match for such a person and this was none of her affair.

Except that it was. If a murder occurred at her aunt's party then it would be Aunt Fletcher's reputation that suffered. It seemed most unfair since her aunt was incapable of harming a fly, but that was the way these things worked. Clio told herself she would be best advised *not* to stick her nose in where it had no place. She should slip away, and no one would be any the wiser.

'A dagger seems the most feasible.'

Despite herself, a worried gasp slipped past Clio's lips.

'What was that?' The duke's voice turned sharp. 'Did you hear something?'

'No, your grace. Just the horses shuffling about and the grooms going about their duties. No one has time to listen to our conversation, which ought to be taking place in your chamber while you change. You are keeping everyone waiting.'

‘Let them wait. This is more important. Besides, this is not the sort of conversation to be had indoors, where there will be eyes and ears everywhere. I need to check that we really are alone before we decide what’s best to be done.’

Damnation, it *was* the duke. She heard footsteps approaching the door and frantically looked round for a means of escape. None was available to her. Curiosity and indecision had caused her to miss her opportunity. Before she could decide what to do, she sensed a presence looming behind her and then a large hand clamped down over her mouth, preventing her from screaming.

‘So,’ said a smooth voice from over her shoulder, ‘they have set a woman to spy. How desperate they must be. Am I supposed to fall for your charms, my lovely? Are you here to entice me into temptation?’ Clio felt furious with herself when her body responded to the hard feel of his as he pressed against her back—and lower. ‘In which case, you might want to rethink that gown. It isn’t nearly revealing enough.’

How dare he! Anger drove away the remnants of Clio’s fear. He loosened the hand that covered her mouth, presumably because he assumed he had nothing to fear from her. She vowed to teach him the error of his ways and bit him.

Hard.

‘Ouch!’ The hand was removed. ‘So,’ the deep rumbling voice, the seductive lure of which she fought to ignore, ‘the witch has teeth. Now that I know what sort of game you want to play, I will of course be happy to oblige.’

‘Let go of me!’

The duke still stood behind her, solid and unmoving. Clio attempted to alter that situation by depositing her elbow in his gut with considerable force. It was like colliding with a brick wall, and he didn’t even flinch.

‘Oh for heaven’s sake, woman!’ He grabbed her upper arm and steered her into the tack room, where a man dressed in the uniform of a senior servant watched developments with amusement. The dog had reappeared and wagged its tail at the duke.

‘Well, Merlin,’ the duke said. ‘A fine guard dog you’re turning out to be. If you continue to neglect your duties then I shall regret adopting you. You are supposed to warn me of intruders before they get close enough to eavesdrop on private conversations.’

‘I was *not* eavesdropping.’

The duke sent her a haughty and disbelieving look—at least Clio thought it was disbelieving, considering that eavesdropping was

exactly what she had been doing. Her first sight of the duke's face had stolen away her anger and left her feeling vulnerable and exposed. She already knew that the man possessed a well-toned body. It seemed unfair that he should also have the face of a god, albeit a very angry yet faintly amused god.

Amused because he didn't think she was nearly attractive enough to seduce him, she supposed. That had not been her intention, of course, but never one to back away from a challenge, she would show him!

'I should say I was not deliberately eavesdropping,' she said, tossing her head in an effort to relocate her dignity and, to her dismay, feeling Daisy's elaborate coiffure lurch to one side. 'I found the dog, wondered who he belonged to and followed him back here, that is all.'

'Of course it is.' The duke executed an elegant bow that somehow managed to convey sarcasm before introducing himself. 'I am Wickham. May I know your name?'

'I am Clio Benton,' she replied, elevating her chin. 'And I will have you know that this is usually a peaceful and quiet house whose owner would not harm a fly. So who is it that you have come here to murder, your grace?'



Ezra went from anger to lazy amusement in the blink of an eye. This was no femme fatale, more's the pity. He was long overdue a little wenching and a clash of wills. He glanced at the lady, little more than a girl in fact, in her turquoise gown with her hair askew. She had an unfashionable decoration of freckles across the bridge of her nose that created in him an inappropriate stirring of interest.

He had felt stirrings of an even less appropriate nature when he had pressed himself against her body, which is why he'd taken a half step back and released the pressure on her mouth, leaving her with a chance to retaliate that he had assumed she would be too terrified to grasp. He glanced at his hand, on which teeth marks were visible. The child clearly had some bite to her, in all senses of the word, and he would not underestimate her for a second time, even though she was far too young to be of interest to him in any other lasting respect. She was little more than half his age.

Whether or not she had come upon him by accident was a moot

point. She must have overheard their conversation and misinterpreted it. Should he allay her fears or perpetuate them? Ezra was unsure. He would need to find out more about her before he reached a decision. What she was doing here on this estate would be as good a place as any to start. He had certainly undertaken worse assignments in his time.

'Benton,' he said. 'Was your father Major General Sir Edward Benton?'

Her eyes widened. They were rather remarkable, he noticed. Very large and an unusual shade of violet shot with silver. Eyes that a man could drown in, if he didn't have a care.

'You knew Papa?' she asked with an air of desperation.

'I served in his regiment, and a finer officer never drew breath,' Ezra said, meaning it. 'You have my sympathy, Miss Benton.'

'Thank you,' she replied with quiet dignity, as tears clouded those lovely eyes.

Ezra gave himself a mental shake when the desire to comfort her in the manner that sprang spontaneously to mind became deucedly difficult to resist. Just because she was Benton's daughter and clearly still mourned his loss, it did not necessarily follow that she hadn't been recruited to distract him; an ambition that she would find remarkably easy to achieve, Ezra was shocked to discover.

Since when had he been reduced to seducing chits barely out of the schoolroom? The question brought him to his senses, after a fashion. Delightful as Miss Benton seemed, Ezra reminded himself that he had accepted an invitation to this party for a reason—a reason that had little to do with his mother's determination to marry him off.

He regarded Miss Benton with a speculative expression.

'I should leave,' she said, turning away. It occurred to Ezra then that she didn't seem overly impressed to find herself alone with the guest of honour. It was a situation that the majority of single females would not hesitate to turn to their own advantage. However, Ezra would wager half his fortune that stratagems of that nature had not occurred to this most unusual female.

He ought to allow her to leave and trust her not to repeat and exaggerate what she had overheard. That would be the sensible and honourable course of action. If she claimed that he was planning a murder, no one would take her seriously. It would be her word against his, after all. Even so, he couldn't let her go, at least not until he had discovered why she had been lurking in the vicinity of the stables, dressed in her finery, when the majority of her sex wouldn't risk

soiling their slippers in such a fashion, not for fifty pounds.

'Why are you really here?' he asked, his voice hardening.

'Where I go and what I do is none of your affair.' She raised her chin, dignified beyond her years and apparently unafraid of him. When Ezra chose to enforce his authoritative status as a duke, few if any had the courage to oppose him. But this chit seemed impervious to his manner, which only served to increase an interest in her that Ezra absolutely couldn't afford to pursue. 'I should remind you that I am not one of your minions, your grace, and I do not answer to you. Nor do I respond well to demands issued by a person who has no authority over me. Besides, I should have thought that a gentleman of your stature would be above bullying a helpless female.'

Godfrey, Ezra's man, who had witnessed the exchange without endeavouring to conceal his amusement, turned a guffaw into a cough.

'Bully? Helpless?' Ezra chortled. 'I have enjoyed the dubious pleasure of your company for less than five minutes, Miss Benton, but I am already convinced that there is nothing helpless about you.'

'Thank you,' she replied with a sweetly sarcastic smile.

'And I do not bully people.'

'Perhaps you do not mean to,' she replied, canting her head in a considering manner, not appearing to notice that the abrupt movement caused her coiffure to slide further to one side, dangerously close to collapse. A long curling strand escaped its pins and tumbled down her back. Ezra was filled with a ridiculous desire to pick it up and run it through his fingers. He clasped his hands behind his back before they could develop a will of their own. Really, this confrontation was not going his way, and yet he was enjoying it enormously and felt no pressing need to bring it to an end.

He couldn't remember the last occasion upon which he had enjoyed an exchange with any female quite so much. And yet she couldn't be more than seventeen. It was quite remarkable.

'You are very unusual,' he said.

'I like to think so.' She offered him a wry smile and spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. Merlin took it as an invitation to be petted and pushed his head beneath one of her gloved hands. She laughed and tugged at his ears, not seeming to notice that the white kid gloves in question came away covered in dark dog hair. 'Everyone who knows me even a little says the same thing, and not always in quite such a complimentary manner. I speak my mind far too freely, you see, but really I see little point in being like everyone else. Life

would be terribly dull if we were all exactly the same, wouldn't it? But that is what society appears to aspire towards. One is criticised, I am told, if one does anything the slightest bit spontaneous.'

'Your outspokenness is refreshing.'

Miss Benton smiled properly—a wide, uncontrived smile—for the first time since their exchange had begun, and the gesture highlighted her features. He noticed her high cheekbones, tinged with a blush of embarrassment, the pleasing shape of her small nose and a delightful, very slightly pointed chin. Her mouth held his attention for a little too long. He moistened his own lips as he contemplated tasting hers and turned abruptly away before whimsy overcame common sense.

He wondered if he had taken a blow to the head in the recent past without realising it. God alone knew, he did not always come out on the winning side of his battle of wills with Pharaoh. Temporary insanity brought about by that means was the only way that he could account for his out of character behaviour.

'My aunt Fletcher would give you an argument in that respect. Young ladies, in her view, should not have opinions of their own, and if they do they most certainly shouldn't voice them in polite company. Especially not in front of high-ranking strangers.'

Of course! Ezra recalled Benton mentioning that Lady Fletcher was his sister. Benton's wife had died in childbirth, and he had not remarried, dedicating himself instead to his army career. He wondered who had cared for this sprightly child during his long absences when he was away fighting for king, country and personal glory and hoped it was a duty that had fallen to Lady Fletcher.

Ezra recalled her from his youth. Those halcyon days when it hadn't once occurred to him that he was destined to become duke and be saddled with all the responsibilities the position brought with it. Lady Fletcher hadn't squealed on Ezra and his friends when she came upon them transgressing various rules, and had proved to be the best possible fun, if a little vague. She was a lady who saw the good in everyone. Ezra knew he was here to look over her elder daughter and wished for a prolonged moment, as he again glanced at Miss Benton, that it could be otherwise. That possibility didn't seem nearly so distasteful as the cattle market that went by the name of the marriage mart.

'Lady Fletcher is not unique in that regard,' he said.

'You do not seem to mind what I say to you. Then again, I don't suppose I would be able to address you, or hold your attention even if I managed to, in the company of others. I know my place,' she said with a whimsical smile, the effects of which Ezra reacted to

somewhere in the region of his groin. ‘You realise, I suppose, that you will be surrounded by sycophants and…well, eligible ladies the moment you step into the house—’

‘And you are not eligible, Miss Benton?’ Enjoying himself enormously, Ezra clutched dramatically at his heart. ‘Am I not permitted to admire you also? Please say you are not spoken for.’

‘Don’t be so foolish, your grace. I am only here to make up the numbers and because…well, because I live here and my aunt couldn’t avoid including me, but I am most definitely not supposed to put myself forward—which naturally I wouldn’t dream of doing.’

‘Oh, naturally!’

‘Stop laughing at me!’ she cried, laughing herself. ‘I am trying very hard to behave with propriety, but I give you due warning, if you will insist upon provoking me then I shall not be able to help myself from retaliating. I have a perverse nature, you see, and can never resist a challenge.’

‘In what manner would you retaliate?’

She gave an arch smile. ‘If I told you that then you would take steps to prevent me.’

It occurred to Ezra then that her intention might actually be to repeat the essence of the conversation she had overheard and obviously misinterpreted to a third party. That thought brought him to his senses and he adjured himself to stop flirting with the chit who, despite her extreme youth, seemed perfectly capable of holding her own against him.

‘Anyway, why are you here when you ought to be in the house, changing for dinner?’

Ezra looked at her askance, taken aback. No one ever dared to question his behaviour; especially not strangers. It didn’t seem to occur to the child that she had just crossed several boundaries in terms of social decorum, to say nothing of good manners. Even so, he glanced down at his stained shirtsleeves and dusty boots, damage incurred during yet another battle for supremacy with Pharaoh, and conceded that she had a point. He had ridden without a hat and his hair was doubtless a mass of tangles and knots, a situation that wouldn’t normally perturb him.

Today, for reasons he preferred not to examine, it did. He wanted this most unusual, spirited and highly individual child-woman to think the best of him. Her gaze roamed impudently over his dishevelled person, making it clear that she wasn’t particularly impressed by what she saw. He retaliated by allowing his gaze to rest significantly upon

her collapsed coiffure.

‘My aunt has already deferred dinner for an hour pending your arrival, which will inconvenience her servants,’ Miss Benton remarked. ‘But still, I don’t suppose the upset to their routine will trouble your conscience.’

‘Do you always speak so much and so freely?’

‘Heavens no! It simply isn’t done.’ She smiled and Ezra couldn’t have torn his gaze away if his life had depended upon it. He once again reminded himself that she had been eavesdropping on his conversation with Godfrey and gave himself a mental dressing down. He looked over at Godfrey, who was watching their exchange silently, although his smile spoke volumes. A less likely spy it was difficult for him to imagine, which meant he was duty bound to mistrust her. But there again, if she had been commissioned by his would-be murderer to lower his defences then it ought to concern him, since his foe had shown considerable cunning in making such an unlikely and captivating choice. But he had her measure now. He would control his most peculiar initial reaction to her and turn the tables on her in the hope that she would lead him directly to the person who meant him harm.

Having found a justification for pursuing the connection, Ezra spoke again. ‘You shame me,’ he said, glancing down at his boots.

‘That I very much doubt.’ She paused. ‘So why are you planning to kill someone?’ Her tone remained conversational. ‘What has your victim done to displease you, and is it anyone I might know?’



Chapter Three

‘I beg your pardon.’

Clio felt her cheeks glow when she recalled the impudent manner in which she had addressed her aunt’s guest of honour and wondered what had made her do it. But, she reasoned, searching for a way to justify her irrational behaviour, he had set the tenor for their conversation, so the blame was entirely his. She had merely retaliated. He probably wasn’t accustomed to people—especially young women—standing up to him, but it was important to make him see that he didn’t intimidate her.

At least not very much.

Anyway, if he thought her impertinent there was nothing to prevent him from sneering down the ducal nose and walking away, so she was surprised by his willingness to linger. Presumably he needed to satisfy himself that he had charmed her into keeping his secret. She could easily believe that the quicksilver charm in question had got him out of trouble on countless occasions.

‘I believe you heard the question,’ she replied, meeting his gaze and holding it, ignoring the fact that his penetrating blue eyes appeared to be able to see into her soul. That was ridiculous, of course. She was in danger of becoming as fanciful as Beth. Everyone knew that souls were invisible, and would be unaffected by the power of a provocative expression. ‘However, I will gladly repeat it. Whom do you intend to kill and why?’

He responded with a disarming smile. ‘If I was planning to assassinate an enemy of the state, or even a personal enemy, I would hardly admit it to you.’

‘Ah, an enemy of the state.’ She nodded, wanting to believe it, even though she did not. ‘That would make sense, I suppose. Even though Napoleon has finally been put in his place, his supporters are still everywhere, I expect, and no doubt a gentleman of your stature is

involved in all sorts of political machinations to bring them to justice. I personally think it quite beyond the pale that certain gentlemen backed the losing side in secret and now expect to get away with it. Even so, I'm sure it's not good form to kill one's enemies at house parties. Not that my aunt would willingly invite a traitor, but if traitors were that easy to identify they wouldn't stay in business for very long, would they?'

Judging by his expression, the duke found her conversational meanderings highly amusing and clearly didn't take her seriously, which was insulting. She could be quite insightful when she put her mind to it. They would have to part soon, and she wouldn't have an opportunity to speak with him alone again. That was a pity, since she found him interesting, even if he did intend to murder one of her aunt's guests. Making a favourable impression and not being looked down upon and dismissed as a harmless child mattered to Clio more than the death of some hapless stranger, who probably deserved to be done away with anyway.

This was Clio's first society party, she reminded herself as she struggled to condone her behaviour, and she most definitely did not want this glamorous duke to dismiss her as an irrelevant distraction, even if she was unsure what she did want from him. She must have broken a dozen rules already by speaking with him alone—her aunt would be appalled if she ever found out. But then again, he had accosted her in a very unorthodox manner and she was damned if she would wilt like a blushing maiden who was afraid of her own shadow. Being predictable was not her style.

It amused Clio to imagine how Beth would have reacted if he had pressed himself against her in such an intimate fashion. It had felt very intimate to Clio, and her cheeks flooded with colour at the recollection. It suddenly seemed insufferably hot in the tack room and she wished she'd had the presence of mind to bring a fan with her. Beth, she knew, would not have pretended that the incident hadn't occurred. She would have taken it as a declaration of intent and would certainly not have bitten his hand. Clio couldn't help smiling at that particular recollection.

However, regardless of the circumstances of their meeting, she didn't want the duke to think her incapable of grasping the fundamentals of anything more taxing than the latest fashions, so she abruptly stopped talking. Why it mattered to her so much what he thought of her she had yet to fathom.

Still unable to decide if he had just told her the truth, she wanted his respect and had no desire for him to think of her as a reckless child who talked too much. When he looked at her with such a deep,

penetrating gaze she most certainly didn't feel like a child. What she did feel was unlike anything she had ever experienced before. A warmth spread from the pit of her stomach to the outermost reaches of her body, overheating her despite the fact that the sun had dipped and a cool breeze had usurped the sun's warmth.

'I must ask for your discretion, Miss Benton,' the duke said. 'There is someone who has been invited to this party and who means us harm, and it is my duty to root him out.'

'Then I will help you,' she said without hesitation. 'No one notices me and it will not surprise you to learn that they often forget I am in a room.' He raised an amused brow. 'I don't gabble away ordinarily,' she proclaimed indignantly. 'I am only doing so now because you make me nervous.'

'Nervous?' He chuckled. 'I find that very hard to believe.'

'Well, you should believe it. You are a duke, in case you had forgotten.'

'As if I could,' he replied with a droll smile that made Clio wonder if he would prefer not to be. Most likely because his brothers had had to die in order to make way for him, which must have distressed him enormously, even if they had disliked one another. Clio didn't have any siblings but her soft heart quailed for the situation that this rugged, confusing and contrary duke found himself in.

'I have heard you spoken of in the most reverent and respectful terms for weeks now, so naturally I am terrified of you.'

'Ha!' He threw back his head and laughed.

'Well anyway, you really must excuse me, your grace.' She bobbed the suggestion of a curtsey. 'Some of us must recall our duty, you know.'

'You might want to do something about your hair before you enter the drawing room,' he replied, chuckling.

He then offered her an elegant bow, whistled to his dog, stretched out his long legs and walked towards the house with his man at his side. Clio watched him go, already wondering if she had just imagined the entire exchange.

The interlude had made her late, and she rushed towards the house, entered by a side door and ran up to her room. Daisy wasn't there, of course. She would not have expected to be needed again and would be below stairs, taking in all the bustle with interest and hoping, no doubt, to encounter Mr Godfrey. Clio wished now that she had taken more notice of the duke's man so that she could decide whether or not he would make a suitable beau for Daisy.

Unfortunately, she had found it impossible to look at anyone else when the duke was in the room, effortlessly dominating it with his authoritative presence.

No matter. Clio was perfectly capable of fixing her hair herself, or so she thought until she glanced in the mirror. And groaned.

'Whatever must he have thought of me?' she muttered.

Her hair looked like a bird's nest, complete with a strand of straw adhering to one ear. How on earth had that got there? Perhaps she needed Daisy's services after all, but decided against ringing for her since she would want to know how Clio had managed to get herself into such a state. It was a question that Clio wasn't prepared to answer now.

Perhaps not ever.

She sat in front of the glass with a resigned sigh, removed a few pins and set to with the brush. She left the top part of her coiffure as it was, since it hadn't suffered too badly, and left the long curls tumbling over her shoulders. It wasn't terribly sophisticated, but no one would take any notice of her.

When she had repaired the damage, Clio took a moment to reflect, even though she was now horribly late. Away from the duke's distracting presence she found it easier to think about what she had overheard. And she was perfectly sure that he *had* deliberately distracted her in the hope that she would forget the gist of his conversation with Mr Godfrey.

As if she could!

If he had intended to appear incapable of cold-blooded murder, he had succeeded better than he could possibly know. Clio had been captivated by an honourable, surprisingly down to earth and rather dissatisfied individual. Her opinion had not been affected in any way by his rugged good looks or lazy, persuasive charm, or because she wanted to believe in him. Of course it had not! She wasn't quite that shallow.

Was she?

If he mentioned in passing to her aunt that their paths had already crossed then she would know that he was duplicitous. That would be the acid test, she decided. He had spared her a few minutes of his precious time to ensure that he had won her over, but wouldn't leave anything to chance. If Clio retaliated by repeating what she had overheard, he would naturally deny it, and his man would back him up.

'Very well,' she told her reflection. 'The situation calls for guile.

There have to be some advantages to being a helpless, bird-brained female. If he doesn't give me away then I shall believe in him. But I shall also watch him, and all the other gentlemen at this party. If I sense animosity then I will know who his intended victim is and find a way to warn him.'

Satisfied with a plan that would appease her conscience—she could not possibly allow her aunt's party to be marred by something as distasteful as murder—she stood up, smoothed down her skirts and made her way downstairs. She smiled when she entered the room and saw Beth looking delicious in a froth of pale muslin, yet dissatisfied. Dissatisfied since her grand entrance would have been wasted.

The duke was not yet in the room.



Ezra and Merlin strode into the house in Godfrey's wake, using the servants' stairs. A plethora of footmen and maids carrying ewers and trays jumped out of his way, flattening themselves against walls as he took the stairs three at a time.

'This way,' Godfrey said, when they emerged on an opulent landing with doors on both sides.

Ezra wasn't surprised when Godfrey stopped in front of the most ornate double doors and thrust them open. Ezra stepped into a suite that overlooked the rear garden and offered a view to the woodland beyond it. Stepping onto the balcony and craning his neck, Ezra could just see the tack room in the far distance and was surprised to discover that he would infinitely prefer to have still been there, exchanging spirited ripostes with the challenging Miss Benton.

'What will you do about the chit, your grace?' Godfrey asked, pouring hot water into a ewer and indicating with a significant glance at the clock and an impatient gesture that Ezra should get a move on.

Ezra knew he was right. He was being appallingly rude in keeping Lady Fletcher waiting simply because he could, knowing that no one would chastise him for his bad manners. He hated people who took advantage of their positions in order to do as they pleased—people like his father, who had been a prime example—and had no intention of falling into that pattern of behaviour.

Thus resolved he stripped off his shirt and breeches and attended to his ablutions. A glance in the mirror confirmed his fears about his hair.

‘Absolutely nothing, for the time being at any rate,’ Ezra said in response to Godfrey’s question.

‘She clearly misinterpreted what she overheard and is bound to tell someone.’

With his head immersed in the basin, Ezra shrugged. ‘Who will believe her?’ he asked when he emerged and dried his face on the towel that Godfrey handed to him. ‘Even so, keep an eye on her maid, and everyone else below stairs for that matter. If the would-be assassin is here, he must have a servant with him. Keep your ears and eyes open.’

‘Don’t I always?’ Godfrey replied, holding out a clean shirt which Ezra slipped over his head. Godfrey was a decade older that Ezra and had been in his service since before Ezra’s life had changed forever. Ezra trusted him absolutely and knew that he would take Ezra’s secrets to the grave if it came to it.

‘I’ve already started down that route,’ he said. ‘Had to find a way to occupy the time while I waited for you to grace us with your regal presence.’

Ezra grunted as he buttoned his patterned silk waistcoat, adjusted the fall of his neckcloth and absently pulled a brush through his tangled hair. ‘Even so, I have a feeling that something will happen this week. Something that will affect the rest of my life—always assuming I live beyond this week, that is.’

‘Don’t worry, your grace. Only the good die young.’

‘Anyway, I shall keep a weather eye on the impertinent Miss Benton…’

Godfrey chuckled. ‘I am perfectly sure you will.’

‘I owe it to her father to keep her in my sights. She is more attractive than she realises. Benton had private means and if she has been left well provided for…well, I don’t suppose she will be astute enough to recognise the fortune hunters for what they are when they start gathering at her door.’

‘Sure you’ve got your priorities right?’ Godfrey asked, holding out Ezra’s coat so that he could slip his arms into it.

‘Not at all,’ he said cheerfully, turning towards the door that Godfrey opened for him. ‘Wish me luck. I have a feeling I am going to need it.’

Ezra jogged down the stairs, his disinclination to play a leading role in this cattle market tempered by the presence of the highly diverting and slightly worrying Miss Benton, whose welfare he had taken it upon himself to safeguard. For all her lively intelligence, she

was still an innocent, with no mother to guide her. He owed her protection to her late father, a man whom he had respected enormously, not least because he had saved Ezra's life.

Ezra thanked Lady Fletcher's butler, who had clearly stationed himself at the foot of the stairs to await his arrival, when he thrust the doors to the drawing room open and announced him. All conversations ceased and every head turned in his direction. Ezra suppressed the urge to turn tail and run as he silently cursed his brothers for leaving him in a position he had never aspired to.

'Your grace.' Lady Fletcher, small and rotund, stepped forward and curtsied. 'How good of you to join us.'

'Lady Fletcher. Thank you for inviting me. I apologise for keeping you waiting. I was unavoidably detained.' He cast a quick look around the room, ready to bestow a collusive glance upon the engaging Miss Benton, but she was nowhere to be seen. 'You have not changed a bit since I last had the pleasure of your company.'

'Ah, you flatterer.' The lady flapped a hand, clearly pleased with the compliment. 'Anyway, you are here now and I am sorry that the journey inconvenienced you. Now, who are you acquainted with?'

Without waiting for a response, Lady Fletcher led him towards a young woman, a very pretty young woman whom, it transpired, was her elder daughter. She curtsied and blushed, exuding confidence in her ability to charm him. Ezra knew nothing to her detriment, but didn't feel so much as a spark of interest. He said and did all the right things, not giving any outward clue as to the nature of his thoughts, and was pleased to be introduced to the younger daughter.

'And then there is my…oh, where is she?'

A flash of turquoise had the desired effect and Lady Fletcher was now assured of Ezra's complete attention when a slightly flushed Miss Benton joined her aunt.

'Ah, here she is. Your hair, child!' Lady Fletcher looked dismayed at a sight Ezra found mesmerising. The urge to run a strand of the hair in question through his fingers had not, it seemed, dissipated. 'Your grace, may I present my niece, Miss Clio Benton?'

'You may indeed.' Ezra executed an elegant bow in response to Miss Benton's demure curtsey. Demure if one discounted the impudent smile that somehow managed to slip past her guard. 'It is a pleasure, Miss Benton,' he said, taking her hand and raising her from that curtsey. 'Do you reside here?'

'I do.'

'And a very welcome addition to our little family dear Clio is

proving to be,' Lady Fletcher said. 'But now, girls, you must excuse us. There are others whom the duke must meet.'

'Until later, ladies,' Ezra said, embracing all three with his words. But his gaze lingered upon Clio.

'Ah, there you are.' Ezra's mother leaned forward and proffered her cheek, which Ezra dutifully kissed. 'We were beginning to wonder what had become of you.'

'I am here now.' Ezra nodded at Conway, his cousin and his mother's constant companion. 'Evening, Silas,' he said affably.

'We were about to send out a search party,' Silas replied, managing to imbue his words with a wealth of disapproval. 'Your poor mama was beside herself with worry and I myself was all of a fluster.' He fanned his face with his ever-present handkerchief to emphasise his point.

'Overreaching your authority again, Silas?' Ezra raised a provocative brow. He didn't care for the fussy little man, but saw no harm in him. He drew the line, however, when he voiced criticisms. If Ezra had to be the duke, he would fulfil that situation in his own fashion. 'If my conduct threatens your health, perhaps you should consider returning to your own home and remaining there in seclusion. It doesn't do to take risks.'

'Good heavens, no! I hope I am not that selfish. Your dear mama needs me. She cannot possibly manage without me.'

Ezra cast a look in his mother's direction, anticipating a denial that was not forthcoming. He wondered how she could tolerate so much flummery, even though a part of him understood why she found it welcome. Ezra's father had been cold and distant with his wife, a lady whom he had married purely for her fortune. He then left her to her own devices in the country, visiting occasionally to fulfil his marital duty, simultaneously carrying on with a string of not particularly discreet affairs. Silas poured all the attention upon her that she could possibly require in return for a roof over his head and a comfortable living. Every so often though, Ezra felt obliged to remind the fussy little man that he only lived so well at Ezra's pleasure.

His mother was still a handsome woman, but she had never had much time for her sons, preferring to immerse herself in her own affairs. She continued to remain distant with Ezra, but not because she mourned the loss of her two older sons. She had been equally indifferent towards them. Ezra sometimes thought that the disappointments had been too much for her and that she had given up on life. However, she had pushed Ezra to attend this party and hoped he would have chosen a wife by the end of it. He glanced across the

room at Lady Beth, aware that she was his mother's choice, and felt nothing more than indifference tinged with boredom. He also knew that the moment he did take a wife, his mother would consider her duty done and retire to the dower house to pursue her own life.

And possibly be a little less circumspect about her lover.

Ezra suppressed a chuckle. He wasn't supposed to know about her ongoing affair with Lord Brennan, a man only a decade older than Ezra, but Ezra had his spies and made it his business to know about everything that happened in his family. That way, there was an outside possibility that he would remain alive. His mother, if she had bothered to confide in him, would have discovered that she had her son's blessing. He would not, however, pay Brennan's debts, which he happened to know were substantial, and the debts in question made him wonder if that was why he had attached himself to an older, well-connected woman. Even so, everyone deserved a chance for happiness, including his emotionally barren mother. He did wonder though where it would leave the insufferable Silas if they were to put their affair on an official footing.

Three was most definitely a crowd.

The butler announced that dinner was served. Ezra did what he knew was expected of him and escorted an ecstatic Lady Beth to table. He winked at Clio, who was on the arm of an audacious cove whose name he couldn't recall but who seemed to be paying far more attention than was seemly to the enticing Miss Benton. He nodded to Henry, who had taken Adele Fletcher in and seemed totally engrossed in whatever she had to say to him. Ezra smiled as he held Lady Beth's chair for her. Something told him that Miss Hardwick, for whose favours Henry had fought a duel and risked being killed only a few days before, had already been supplanted in Henry's affections.

The meal was excellent but dragged on interminably. Ezra struggled to find anything to say to Lady Beth that didn't result in monosyllabic responses that were totally in accord with Ezra's expressed views. He glanced frequently down the table to the position where Miss Benton and her neighbour appeared to find a great deal to talk and laugh about. Ezra would wager his fortune that she didn't automatically concur with her dinner partner's opinions, damned his impudent eyes!

Finally, the meal came to an end. Lady Fletcher glanced down the table to ensure that everyone had finished, put her napkin aside and stood. All the ladies followed suit and Ezra was on his feet in seconds, reversing the process with Lady Beth's chair. He resumed his own as she walked sedately away, hips swaying provocatively, and pretended

not to notice when she kept sending wistful glances in his direction over her shoulder. Miss Benton, by contrast, linked arms with Lady Adele and didn't once look back.

'Thank God that's out the way,' Ezra muttered, pouring a healthy measure of port and passing the decanter to Henry, who had moved to occupy Beth's vacated seat.

'You didn't find the delicious Lady Beth to your liking?' he asked. 'No, don't tell me. Of course you did not.' Henry expelled a long suffering sigh and rolled his eyes. 'I personally think that all the ladies here this evening are perfectly charming, and I dare say talented too. But you find fault with everyone you see. I tell you true, Ezra, I wouldn't be you, not for all your wealth and consequence.'

'You appeared to enjoy Lady Adele's company,' Ezra remarked in a low voice while the rest of the gentlemen chatted amongst themselves.

'I say, isn't she a vision! I think she may be the one.'

'What of Miss Hardwick?'

'Oh her.' Henry flapped a dismissive hand. 'She's charming, but I don't think she truly likes me so I shall not pursue her. Wouldn't be gentlemanly. I will leave the field clear for Carstairs.'

'That's the spirit,' Ezra replied, chuckling. 'What did Lady Adele have to say about her cousin?'

'Oh, the quiet little thing in turquoise.' Quiet? Ezra smiled to himself. 'They are the greatest of friends, it seems. She came to live here quite recently.' Ezra hadn't known that the move had been recent and wondered where she had lived before that. 'We are acquainted with her father, of course, or were. He was our major general.'

'I thought that might be the case.'

'Well anyway, she and Lady Adele will come out together next year, unless one or the other of them finds a husband before then, of course.' Henry grinned. 'Stranger things have been known to happen.'

'Take it slowly,' Ezra cautioned, aware that his words would be ignored. It was several weeks since Henry had fallen undyingly in love with Miss Hardwick. It was beyond time that cupid's arrow struck again.

The gentlemen had only just returned to the drawing room and Ezra had prepared himself to withstand a barrage of indifferent performances on the pianoforte designed to impress him when a commotion in the doorway heralded a late arrival.

'Captain Salford!' Lady Fletcher cried, rushing forward. 'I am so

very glad that you could be excused from your duties.'

'How could I resist your invitation,' a man whom Ezra despised asked, oozing insincere charm. 'Especially when it gives me the opportunity to spend time with Miss Benton.'

'That is the major general's adjutant, Captain Salford, unless I mistake the matter,' Henry said, drifting up to Ezra's side. 'The man you wanted to have cashiered.'

'I am told,' Silas said with malicious glee as he too joined Ezra, 'that he is also Miss Benton's intended.'



Chapter Four

Clio glanced towards Captain Salford and her heart sank. She had not been aware that he'd been invited. Her aunt had promised her a surprise and she had assumed it would be an agreeable one. Not that she had anything against Captain Salford precisely. Indeed, her father had thought very highly of him and he had been a frequent visitor to Benton House on the less frequent occasions when Papa had been in occupation of it.

During her younger years the captain had treated Clio with distracted condescension. He had actually patted her on the head on several occasions when she had been eleven or twelve, as though she was a lap dog. He tended to pass asinine remarks that as a child it hadn't occurred to her to challenge. He was Papa's righthand man, and Clio craved her father's approval, so as she grew from child to woman she tolerated the captain's increasingly more extravagant compliments. She didn't take them seriously, but she hadn't discouraged him either. Perhaps she had given him the wrong impression, she now accepted, and he had mistaken her reticence for maidenly modesty.

Did he seriously believe that she would welcome his advances?

She could not have said what it was about Captain Salford that offended her, other than the fact that he wasn't nearly as intelligent as he pretended to be, and lacked a sense of humour. Clio could not abide stupidity and delighted in laughing at life's absurdities. Her mind drifted to her earlier lively exchange with the duke, but she chased the recollection away. Now was not the time.

There most likely never would be an appropriate time to untangle her jumbled emotions regarding that particular gentleman. Besides, he was way beyond her reach and Clio would not waste her life pining

after the unattainable.

'Clio,' he said, approaching her with both arms outstretched, as though intent upon embracing her in front of a roomful of people. She would not permit him to do so in private and had no intention of setting a precedent in public.

'Captain Salford,' she said at the same time, adroitly avoiding his arms and leaving him foolishly clutching fresh air.

'I had hoped for a more fulsome welcome,' he replied, his broad smile slipping.

'I am sure you are very welcome,' Clio replied evasively. 'It is just that no one told me you had been invited.'

'I hope the surprise is not an unpleasant one.'

'I dare say you will prove a welcome addition to the party.'

Captain Salford did not look encouraged by Clio's ambiguous response but only had himself to blame for that misfortune. Had he taken the trouble to get to know her better during her formative years he would be aware that she spoke as she found.

'Lady Fletcher was kind enough to offer me her hospitality when she learned that I was in England, desirous of seeing my ward.'

'Your ward?' Clio elevated a brow. 'To whom do you refer?'

Clio was conscious of the duke moving closer to her position by the open French windows, as though attempting to repay the favour and eavesdrop on *her* conversation. She smiled in spite of herself. Although she didn't know him well, she suspected it was just the sort of capricious revenge he would enjoy exacting. Why he felt the need to do so when half the room was clamouring for his attention was less obvious to her.

To say she had only just become conscious of his close proximity would be a falsehood. She had been acutely aware of his presence dominating the room for the entire evening, along with just about every other female in occupation of it, she suspected, allowing herself a wry smile. She hated herself for being so predictable, but her mind appeared determined to dwell upon his myriad attributes, which did not improve her mood.

She had noticed just how well he and Beth complimented one another at table. They were by far the most attractive couple in attendance, and Clio was thoroughly ashamed of herself when part of her rejoiced because the duke and Beth had appeared to have little to say to one another. When she had been alone with him in the tack room, the conversation had never been in danger of drying up. Now Cora Marlow, with her mother's not-so-subtle encouragement, was

hovering in the duke's periphery, displaying her admittedly attractive person for his approval. Sadly for Lady Cora, the duke wasn't paying her even scant attention.

'Why your dear self, of course.'

'Me?' Clio pointed at her own chest for emphasis. 'Your ward? Nonsense! I was not aware that Papa had—'

'He did not, but only because he ran out of time. I thought you were aware of his intentions in that regard.'

'It's the first I have heard of it.'

Clio glanced over her shoulder, annoyed to discover that Lady Fletcher had been waylaid by another guest. Clio had no intention of introducing the captain to the rest of the party, thereby emphasising the impression that he had some sort of claim on her affections. It was not her place to do so. Besides, she couldn't recall who half of the elegant people were.

'He was worried about your wellbeing and knew he could trust me to look out for your interests—to guide you, if you like.' Clio did not like, but refrained from saying so, at least for now. It would result in a battle of wills that had no place in Lady Fletcher's drawing room. 'But alas, his illness got the better of him before the arrangements could be put in place, and clearly before he could mention the matter to you. However, I fully intend to keep my promise to him and take care of you.'

'Thank you, Captain, but that will not be necessary. I am quite comfortable here with Lady Fletcher, where no harm can possibly come to me. It would not be fair to keep you from your soldiering.'

'We are currently at peace, Clio, and my duties are not onerous. Certainly not so onerous that I cannot make time for you. My presence is required at Horse Guards from time to time but the distance from there to here is not considerable.'

No one seemed to be paying them much attention anymore, other than the duke, who still lingered and actually sent her a concerned look when she glanced in his direction. One or two of the ladies who had clearly decided they had no chance of attracting the duke's interest sent speculative looks the captain's way instead, Lady Cora amongst their number. Clio could quite understand why. He was unquestionably a handsome man, and his military bearing lent him a sophisticated air. He could also be entertaining when he put his mind to it, but Clio found his charm shallow and insincere. The only person Captain Salford loved was himself.

'Thank you, but please do not spare a thought for me. I am settled

with my aunt and quite old enough to take care of myself.'

'Ah, you think you are.' He grasped her hand, placed it on his sleeve. 'Come, let us take a turn around the room.'

The unnecessarily proprietorial display irritated Clio and her inclination was to decline. But such a gesture would be impolite, and she was unwilling to create a scene that would embarrass her aunt, so she walked at his side, quietly fuming.

'You are unaccustomed to gatherings of this nature,' the captain said, causing Clio to wonder how he could possibly know what she was and was not accustomed to. 'Your father worried about your introduction to society.' Clio raised a brow, thinking that if such a thing was true it would be the first time that he had worried about anything other than military strategy. 'You are attractive and wealthy —a lethal combination that will make you the centre of attention for all the wrong reasons. I aim to protect you from those who would exploit your innocence.'

'You assume to know a great deal about me, but we are barely acquainted,' she said coldly.

He looked down at her and sent her a look that was probably intended to be intimate. Clio averted her gaze. 'A situation that I intend to rectify,' he said.

'You presume too much, Captain,' she said in an arch tone.

'Ah, my dear, I am so sorry.' Clio could have kissed her aunt when she bustled up to them. 'Lady Dennington needed my advice and I could not get away. However, I shall introduce the dear captain to the rest of my guests. You come too, Clio. I would not separate you love birds for any consideration.'

'Love birds?' Clio shared a bemused look between them.

'Clio, I can explain.'

'You presume too much,' Clio repeated in an angry hiss. 'No, Aunt, thank you,' she said in a normal voice. 'You must excuse me but I have nothing more to say to the captain and shall enjoy a moment to myself.'

'Nothing more to say?' Aunt Fletcher pinched Clio's cheek. 'This is no time for modesty. However, have it your way. Come along, Captain. I shall not keep you from dearest Clio for long.'

Captain Salford looked furious to have had his clumsy ploy exposed. Clio sensed an air of danger about him that he'd previously managed to keep concealed. He clearly hadn't expected to encounter any opposition from her, mainly because she had remained docile in all previous exchanges with him, doubtless giving him the impression

that she would be easy to manipulate. That, she now accepted, had been a miscalculation, a grave error of judgement that had landed her in this embarrassing situation.

She watched him now as he sucked in a breath at the last moment and wisely refrained from insisting that she remain with him. Instead, he bestowed a charming smile upon Aunt Fletcher and offered her his arm.

'I shall not be long,' the captain assured Clio, 'and then I shall be at leisure to explain myself.'

'Not if I have any say in the matter,' Clio muttered beneath her breath. Even so, the captain must have heard her, since he scowled. Lady Fletcher, who was a little hard of hearing, missed the exchange.

Clio watched the captain's tall, lean figure and her aunt's far shorter one until they were swallowed up by the crowd. Turning on her heel, she felt a sudden need for fresh air and slipped through the open French doors, cursing her aunt's interference, however kindly meant. The pleasure had gone out of the party for her now on this, its first night.

The balmy evening air touched her heated skin but failed to cool the tempestuous nature of her thoughts. She leaned on the balustrade and stared up at the velvety sky as the last of the daylight faded and the stars emerged to put on a show that Clio was too preoccupied to appreciate.

She moved away before others who had wandered outside could accost her. She had in truth begun to suspect even before she had closed up Benton House and removed to Lady Fletcher's abode that the captain's interest in her transcended the avuncular. She had done nothing to encourage his expectations, and believed that she had seen the last of him after Papa's death. Clearly, the man had a thicker skin than she had given him credit for. Either that or he was one of the fortune hunters her father had advised her to be on her guard against.

'How dare he simply assume! Now I will have to spend the entire week keeping out of his way.' Clio was fit to be tied as she marched up and down so fast and turned so abruptly that she almost trod on a flounce. Mindful of the ruinously expensive fabric, she forced herself to moderate her pace, but not her language. 'I would not allow the presumptuous oaf to…Oh!'

Clio had slowed down but hadn't been looking where she was going and collided with a solid wall. A solid wall made of muscle, covered with superfine and giving off a distinct masculine aroma that awoke every nerve ending in Clio's body. She knew at once whom she had collided with and her heart rate accelerated as she glanced up

into the duke's arresting features.

'You again,' she said accusingly.



'Talking to yourself, Miss Benton?' Ezra asked, a little taken aback by the extent of the fiery anger that flashed through her eyes.

'Eavesdropping, your grace?'

'Certainly. It might interest you to know that I learned just this very day that eavesdropping is an excellent means of getting the wrong idea.'

She shook her head and smiled. 'You will have to do better than that if you mean to convince me that you are not a potential murderer.'

'Me?' He flashed a boyish smile. 'I am completely harmless.'

She sent him a disbelieving look. 'You are dangerous and unpredictable, as are most men who find themselves in positions of authority that no one dares to challenge.'

'*You* challenge me at every opportunity.'

'That's because I don't want anything from you.'

'Which is a shame.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' She paused. 'Did you follow me out here? If so, I think it very impolite of you to disappoint all the young ladies inside who hang on your every word and deserve their share of your society.'

'They are such a delightful gaggle,' he said without much conviction.

She burst out laughing. 'You might at least pretend to be sincere.'

'Are you really engaged to be married to that…person?'

'That is none of your business.' She arched a brow. 'You have something against Captain Salford?'

'From what I accidentally overheard of your conversation, the same could be said of you. I have seen more enthusiastic brides to be.'

'Do you ever answer a straightforward question properly?'

'I am enjoying our conversation so much that I have quite forgotten what the question was.'

‘Liar!’

Ezra laughed. ‘You are not supposed to accuse dukes of lying. It isn’t at all the done thing, you know.’

‘You are not a normal duke.’

‘Thank you.’ He sent her a dubious look. ‘I think.’

They both laughed.

‘I have crossed swords with Salford on more than one occasion,’ Ezra said, turning serious. ‘I hesitate to speak ill of your intended but —’

‘He is not my intended. I cannot think where that rumour came from, and I aim to put a stop to it. Well, actually I can. He implied to Lady Fletcher that we had reached an understanding. My aunt has a romantic nature and so naturally Captain Salford received his invitation to this party, which I fear has spoiled it for me.’

‘I am so glad,’ he replied softly.

‘That my pleasure has been curtailed?’ She sent him an assessing look. ‘That is not very gallant of you, your grace. But feel free to speak as ill as you like of the captain. I have always thought that there was something of the night about him, for want of a better description, although perhaps I didn’t realise it until now.’

‘Yet your father depended upon him.’

‘He is a sound strategist in the field of battle and was an excellent adjutant, so Papa always insisted. He was a frequent visitor to Benton House whenever Papa was at home, which was not that often. I got quite used to seeing him there and didn’t think much of it. Of course, he called after…’ She swallowed. ‘He called close on the heels of Papa’s death but I was not receiving. He tried to insist, I gather, but my governess sent him packing.’

‘I am glad someone did the right thing by you.’ They reached a row of steps at the end of the terrace. Ezra took her arm and helped her down them, releasing it again when they reached the lower level, which was out of sight of the main terrace. ‘There, he won’t find you for a while now.’

‘I am not going to spend the entire week hiding from him,’ she replied, bridling. ‘I am no coward and I will make it very plain to him that his attentions are unwelcome.’

‘I don’t doubt it, but will he take defeat gracefully, that is the question?’

‘He will have little choice in the matter, if he is half the gentleman he thinks himself to be, which is questionable.’

Ezra chuckled. ‘Remind me never to get on your wrong side.’

‘You already have, by making murderous plans that will quite spoil the atmosphere my aunt has striven so hard to create.’

Ezra laughed, and they walked for a moment or two in companionable silence. He would never permit himself to walk with any single female unchaperoned as a general rule, but he found himself revelling in Miss Benton’s exclusive company. He sensed there was more to Salford’s pursuit of her than her obvious charms and reputed fortune. He didn’t trust the rogue’s intentions, and since he had satisfied himself that Miss Benton really didn’t crave his company, he would take it upon himself to protect this beguiling creature from the captain’s manipulative tentacles. She might think she was versed in the ways of the world, but she was an innocent and needed his help. She was far too proud to make such an admission, even if she privately acknowledged the truth of it, but Ezra had now come upon a reason he could live with, a justification for remaining close to her.

‘When the captain does find me here alone with you,’ she said, her melodic voice rousing Ezra from a charming reverie that featured the beguiling Miss Benton, a barn full of soft hay and…Enough!

‘Yes, Miss Benton?’ he said smoothly. ‘When the captain finds us here together…’

‘You intend to warn him off, I suppose.’ She huffed indignantly. ‘I cannot think why else you are keeping me out here, away from everyone else on the main part of the terrace. You think I am incapable of looking out for myself.’ She pouted this time, looking highly affronted. ‘Why must gentlemen insist upon being so protective? It’s insulting, infuriating, inconsiderate, in…in everything.’

‘We can return to the terrace if you would prefer it. My intentions are, I can assure you, quite honourable. In the most part,’ he added with a mischievous smile.

She burst out laughing and lightly punched his arm. ‘You are impossible!’

‘Where is your governess now?’ Ezra asked, as they continued to stroll, the path lit by the occasional wall sconce and the light spilling from the downstairs rooms, along with the sound of the piano being played badly and snippets of muted conversations.

‘Back in Yorkshire, caring for her ailing mother. It was unfortunate timing, but of course she had to do her duty. I no longer had need of a governess, but Mrs McAnally had become more of a companion. One who made it possible for me to continue living at Benton House alone.’

‘And when she was called away, you closed it up and came here?’

‘Not at first. I went to stay with my mother’s brother’s family in Wales, but that was not satisfactory. I didn’t like it there and felt I was an inconvenience.’

‘You?’ Ezra raised a brow, disguising how sorry he felt for the chit behind a façade of mock amusement. ‘I am sure you gave no trouble whatsoever.’

‘Well, of course I did not!’ she cried indignantly. ‘There is no need to look so surprised. However, my uncle is a harsh man, not at all as compassionate as my aunt Fletcher. He has no daughters of his own and didn’t have the first idea how to cope with someone of my age disrupting his household simply by being there.’ She flashed an impudent smile. ‘Not because I misbehaved in any way.’

‘And so you came here?’

‘No, I went to stay with an old lady, a friend of Mama’s in Chelsea, but that didn’t work out either. She was too set in her ways, and I think I was too lively for her.’

‘That I can readily understand.’

‘Odious man!’ Miss Benton sent him a scathing look. ‘It is clear that you intend to insult me by every means at your disposal but I shall rise above your petty-mindedness.’

‘Petty-minded?’ Ezra shook his head, enjoying himself enormously. ‘No one has ever thrown that accusation at me before.’

‘I expect all the people you encounter want to make a good impression, so they avoid being brutally honest. All the ladies in the house are keen to engage your amatory interest, and all the gentlemen hope for your patronage in some respect or other.’ She canted her head and sent him a considering look. ‘The flummery must grow tiresome, which is why I am determined not to flatter or offer false praise. I can afford to be myself, and should it become necessary I shall point out your shortcomings for your own benefit. I don’t want anything from you, so I can risk giving offence. There, I hope that pacifies you.’

‘I have yet to recover from the astonishment of learning that I have shortcomings.’

They both laughed. ‘I dare say you will get over that humbling truth, given time. Brandy is good for shock, so I am told, but I don’t suppose you need an excuse to resort to its medicinal properties.’

‘You do me a disservice, Miss Benton. I am a sober, god-fearing chap.’

She sent him an amused sideways look. ‘Of course you are!’

‘What must I do to impress you?’

Her laughter abruptly faded. ‘You don’t need to worry. I have not told anyone what I overheard, and nor shall I. I give you my word in that respect but I cannot promise not to warn the person you intend to murder, should I learn his identity. Unless of course,’ she added capriciously, ‘Captain Salford is the man you have in your sights, in which case you would be doing me a service.’

‘I have nothing to fear from your meddling because you misinterpreted what you overheard.’

‘Well, they do say that eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves. I hope I did get it wrong, because without wishing to sound like one of the ladies in the drawing room, you are one of the few people here who is worth talking to. Mind you,’ she added hastily, ‘I have not spoken to that many guests as yet so don’t read too much into the compliment.’

Ezra quirked a brow. ‘Was there a compliment in there somewhere?’

‘Tell me why you do not care for Captain Salford. I have not forgotten that you adroitly changed the subject when I raised it before.’

‘I cannot share the particulars, but—’

‘Why can you not?’ she asked impatiently. ‘And don’t you dare say that you would prefer not to offend my sensibilities,’ she added, wagging a warning finger beneath his nose. ‘My sensibilities are very robust, I thank you. Why do gentlemen get to decide what is and is not seemly?’

Ezra cleared his throat, tempted, very tempted, to enlighten her. ‘I do not make the rules, my sweet.’

‘I am not your sweet,’ she replied impatiently. ‘You are fast becoming as tiresome as Captain Salford.’

‘Now you are being deliberately offensive.’

‘Sorry,’ she replied, stifling a giggle that reminded Ezra just how young she still was. ‘Even you do not deserve such a comparison.’

‘How old are you?’

She stopped walking and planted her fisted hands on her slender hips. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Humour me? Since I am told you are not yet officially out, one assumes you cannot be more than seventeen or eighteen, but you appear older, which is why I ask. You have a lively, enquiring mind

which, without wishing to sound patronising, is as unusual as it is refreshing. Most chits of your age are incapable of stringing two intelligible sentences together. Your cousin Lady Beth is a case in point.'

'Ah, but Beth is lovely inside and out, which is far more important.'

'Of course it is.'

'And she would never accuse you of having shortcomings.'

They both laughed.

'Since your ducal personage entitles you to ask personal questions,' she replied after a short pause, 'I have no objection to your knowing that I am seventeen.'

'So young and yet so worldly,' he muttered.

'Now it is my turn to wonder if that was intended as a compliment,' she replied with asperity.

'You may depend upon it.' He paused. 'Salford brought discredit to the regiment,' he said, grinding his jaw. 'In times of war the lines get blurred and the forces on both sides do not always behave well.'

'I see,' she said, looking up at him through sparkling eyes full of curiosity. 'Do tell me more.'

'Let us just say that he pressed his attentions where they were unwelcome on more than one occasion and got away with it. As I say, the spoils of war are not always honourable. When men are confronted with the very real possibility of giving their lives in the cause of king and country, they…well, they become reckless in their pursuit of pleasure.'

'Eat, drink and be merry,' she murmured.

'You know your bible. However, Salford went too far, and forced himself upon the daughter of an important village elder in Spain whom he must have known was off limits. It almost caused a diplomatic incident. I was obliged to report his behaviour to your father, but Salford denied it outright. It was his word against mine.'

Miss Benton stopped walking. 'And my father doubted yours?' she asked, looking shocked.

'He wanted independent proof.'

'I suppose he would. The military love their procedures. Besides, even if he accepted that you spoke the truth, he wouldn't want his favourite cashiered. It would reflect badly upon him too, and Papa was a career soldier first and foremost, and set a great deal of stock by his standing and reputation.'

Ezra nodded, impressed by her astute grasp of the situation. ‘Anyway, there was no independent proof to be had. The girl had been taken into seclusion and no one was permitted to question her. Only Godfrey, my man whom you met earlier, could verify my account. He acted as my batman during the conflict and observed the incident, but Salford demanded that he not be questioned since he was loyal to me and would therefore say whatever I told him to.’

Miss Benton pulled her lower lip between her teeth in a considering fashion. ‘And to a man of honour, whose word is his bond, that must have rankled.’

‘More than rankled, but thank you for believing me.’

Actually,’ she replied, walking on once more, ‘you have just vindicated my distrust of Captain Salford. I have never really liked him but if pressed could not have said why. He somehow made my aunt believe that an understanding exists between us, thereby securing an invitation to this party, presumably with the intention of persuading me into an engagement. I knew nothing about his impending arrival. I suspect he asked my aunt to keep it a secret because he wanted to surprise me. He is a master manipulator and that is just the sort of ruse that my soft-hearted aunt would fall for. But here’s the thing; I cannot for the life of me think why he has fixed his interest on me.’

‘Your modesty does you credit. Despite being outspoken, opinionated and downright disrespectful, you are not unattractive.’

‘Bah!’

‘And you are, if you’ll excuse me, well situated.’

‘You think he is after my fortune?’ She nodded emphatically. ‘Very likely. The hypocrite just now warned me that the fortune hunters would gather and that I would need him to protect me from them.’ She rippled her shoulders indignantly. ‘This is such a bother!’

‘It need not be. I shall not permit him to make a nuisance of himself.’

‘Thank you, your grace, but this is not your battle.’

‘I intend to make it so.’

She stopped walking again and turned to face him. ‘Why? I have already assured you that your secret is safe with me. You owe me nothing.’

Unable to prevent himself, he placed his index finger beneath her chin and tilted her head backwards until their gazes clashed. And held. ‘I am becoming accustomed to being in your debt,’ he said softly, running the pad of his thumb across her plump lips. ‘And I confess to

enjoying the experience.'

She swallowed, suddenly looking as young and inexperienced as she actually was. Ezra adjured himself to behave, but his heart and head appeared not to be on speaking terms. 'You cannot…'

'Clio! Clio, are you there?'

'Damn!' Ezra stepped back and placed her hand on his sleeve, unsure whether to be glad of the timely interruption or to resent it. 'Time to give the rogue his first lesson,' he said, winking at her.

'Clio, I say…' Salford stumbled upon them and stopped dead in his tracks. 'Oh, Wickham, it's you.'

Ezra fixed the captain with a quelling look. 'Something I can do for you, Salford?' he asked in a haughty tone.

'I came in search of Miss Benton. Thank you for biding her company, Wickham, but I have her now.'

'I am not a parcel, Captain Salford,' Miss Benton said, matching Ezra's haughty tone. 'And I am perfectly at ease in the duke's company.' She smiled up at Ezra. 'Thank you for enlightening me, your grace.'

'Enlightening you about what?' Salford asked, an edge to his voice.

Ezra and Miss Benton both ignored him.

'Would you like to return to the drawing room?' Ezra asked politely.

'Thank you, your grace. That would be delightful. I can no longer hear the pianoforte so it is probably safe.'

They both laughed as Ezra conducted her past Salford as though he wasn't there. 'I'll chance it if you will,' he said.



Mark Salford gaped helplessly at Clio as she and the duke turned and walked away, laughing at something one of them had just said. They were more than likely laughing at him, he thought, his anger bubbling to the surface. This was supposed to be easy, damn it! Clio Benton had always been biddable, willing to do whatever her father asked of her. Just hinting that he had approved of their union should have brought her to heel, but the kitten appeared to have developed claws since he had last seen her.

She had grown more attractive too, in an understated manner. Marriage to her wouldn't be so very bad. But that bastard Wickham appeared to be intent upon queering his pitch out of some misguided sense of revenge. The major general had taken Mark's side in that ridiculous fiasco over the Spanish senorita, even if their close friendship had waned in its aftermath, as though Benton had taken Wickham's word over his but didn't act upon it for reasons of self-interest.

Ah well, Mark was nothing if not ready for a little healthy competition. It wasn't as though Wickham would seriously contemplate marriage to someone as lowly as Clio. He was simply using her as a means to an end. It just went to show that his morals were as loose as he accused Mark of his being.

Well, if that was Wickham's intention, Mark would bide his time and return the favour. He would save Clio from Wickham's amorous clutches and earn her undying gratitude. Thus resolved, he sauntered back into the drawing room, ignored Clio and flirted with one of the chits who gravitated to his side.



Chapter Five

‘Where have you been?’ Adele drifted up to Clio’s side. ‘And what is all this I hear about your being engaged to the rather suave captain? You certainly kept that to yourself. I thought we confided in one another unreservedly, and yet you chose to keep the most important decision of your life from me.’

‘Not at all,’ Clio replied succinctly. ‘I was as surprised as you are. I think I would remember if I had agreed to enter into an engagement with anyone.’

‘Oh, but he implied to Mama…’

‘Or my aunt misunderstood, simply because she wanted it to be so?’

Adele smiled. ‘I did wonder about that. It seemed odd since I have seldom heard you mention the captain’s name, which I am sure I would have done if you liked him in that way.’

‘Well, there you have it.’

‘But still, if he likes you, would it be so very bad?’

Clio smiled at her friend. ‘Given the amount of attention bestowed upon you by Lord Fryer, I am surprised you even noticed the captain’s arrival,’ she remarked, keen to divert their conversation away from her own marital ambitions, or lack thereof.

Adele blushed. ‘I will confess that I find Lord Fryer’s company congenial. He doesn’t take life too seriously and makes me smile.’

‘In which case I give you my permission to like him as much as you please.’

‘I don’t think he feels any particular partiality for me,’ Adele said, biting her lip in a modest display of self-doubt. ‘I have seen him speaking with several other ladies since he returned to the drawing room and making them laugh as well.’

‘I don’t suppose he would deliberately set out to make them cry.’ Clio squeezed Adele’s hand. ‘I have barely exchanged a dozen words with the gentleman but he seems to be the type who is naturally sociable. However, I also happened to notice the way you engaged his complete attention at table. Take heart from the fact that I haven’t seen any of your rivals for his affections managing that feat.’

‘Oh, Clio, I have not fixed my interest on Lord Fryer. You assume too much.’

‘Do I?’ Clio asked with a playful lift of both brows.

‘However, I fully intend to enjoy this party, and if Lord Fryer should happen to crave my company…’

‘Good manners would preclude you from denying him that pleasure, of course. And why should you attempt to, my love?’ Clio sensed a presence and glanced over her shoulder. Captain Salford was bearing down on them, wearing a determined expression. The duke, Clio noticed, was sauntering around the periphery of the gathering, exchanging a word here and there, but never taking his attention from Clio for long. She was unsure whether to feel irritated or comforted by this self-imposed display of ducal protection. ‘I cannot face the captain now,’ she said to Adele abruptly. ‘If he attempts to press his suit, it will only strengthen his claims when others see us together and make erroneous assumptions.’

‘It is very wrong of him, and arrogant in the extreme to simply assume, based on nothing more than his close association with your father.’

‘Indeed it is.’ Clio gave another glance over her shoulder. The captain had been delayed by a question put to him by one of the matrons, but Clio suspected he would not permit himself to be detained for long. ‘I don’t want to argue with him in my aunt’s drawing room. That is a confrontation I will have to postpone until a more suitable juncture. Occupy him while I slip upstairs.’

Without giving Adele the opportunity to respond, Clio moved away and headed for the hallway. Glancing back, she noticed Adele conversing with the captain and Clio made good her escape, conscious of the duke’s gaze boring into her back from the open doorway as she ascended the stairs. She caught his gaze and he inclined his head, as if to reassure her.

Reassure her about what precisely, she wondered.

Clio reached her room without the captain running after her. She would not have put such a bold move past him, since he seemed determined to accost her and appeared somewhat perplexed by his

failure to immediately secure her affections. Such arrogance!

'Bah!' she cried, ringing the bell for Daisy and then throwing herself onto the window seat. The grounds were in darkness, but for the occasional corridor of light cast over the gardens by the candles lighting up the ground floor rooms. She threw her window open to welcome a slight breeze and heard snatches of various conversations rising up from the terrace beneath her.

'Goodness, miss!' Daisy puffed into the room. 'I did not expect you to retire so early. The word is that Captain Salford is here with the express purpose of paying court to you.'

Clio twitched her nose. 'That's as maybe, but I have no particular desire to be courted.'

'But I thought…'

'You thought what, Daisy? That just because he was my father's favourite, I would welcome a father substitute.'

'Well, he is fearful handsome, miss.' Daisy giggled. 'And I don't think he looks upon you with a paternal eye,' she added.

Clio laughed, thinking it unfair to take out her unsettled mood on her maid. 'Looks can be deceiving.'

'I hear…Good heavens, what happened to your hair?'

Clio had forgotten about her style disaster. 'Oh, you know,' she said, vaguely.

Daisy tutted as she removed the remaining pins and set to with a brush. 'You should take more care, miss. All my hard work was for no purpose.'

'I think there were one or two who appreciated it,' she replied, thinking of the duke's reaction to the calamity. 'Are you enjoying yourself with Mr Godfrey?'

'It's not like that, more's the pity. But he is a very agreeable person, unlike some who think they can take liberties with us servants and not answer for the consequences. Well, he's a servant himself, of course, albeit a very senior one, but he doesn't look down on us lesser mortals and generally makes himself agreeable.'

'There is nothing lesser about you, Daisy. Don't put yourself down. You are a lady's maid, Mr Godfrey is a gentleman's…well all right, a duke's valet, but you are still equals, more or less.'

'That is what he says.'

'Ah, so he has singled you out.' Clio grinned. 'How very sensible of him. I am sure there is no one below stairs to compete with your prettiness.'

‘Oh, miss, you’re biased,’ Daisy said, flushing and beaming simultaneously.

‘What did you and he talk about?’

‘All manner of things. He has been to so many places in the duke’s service and seen so many things, it’s hard to fathom. He has been with his grace since before he became the duke. He was just Lord Ezra back then and was quite happy to remain so, according to Mr Godfrey.’ Daisy paused with brush in hand. ‘He mentioned that you encountered the duke in the grounds earlier. He asked a lot of questions about you.’

‘I hope you didn’t tell him too much.’

‘Of course not.’ Daisy looked highly offended. ‘As if I would betray your trust.’

‘I know you would not. Sorry.’ Clio turned her head so fast that she almost dislodged the brush from Daisy’s hand. ‘I am feeling out of sorts, what with the captain turning up so unexpectedly.’ She sighed. ‘I wish he had not come. In fact, I wonder what it is that he really wants.’

‘Well obviously, he has lost his heart to you. It stands to reason.’

‘If that is the case then he is destined for disappointment. I don’t even like him very much, especially now that I better understand…’

‘Understand what about him?’

‘Nothing.’

Clio fell silent as Daisy braided her hair. As soon as she had changed into her night attire she dismissed her maid, anxious to be done with her probing questions and curious glances. Not tired, Clio curled up on the window seat and stared out at the dark gardens. She could hear a man immediately below her window cajoling a female to spare him a kiss. She was severely tempted to lean out the window and find out who they were. Then she recalled her own situation not so very long ago, alone with a duke whom she had been convinced was on the verge of kissing her.

Who *would* have kissed her, had not Captain Salford interrupted them—another reason to resent his presence. The devil of it all was that Clio would not have prevented the duke from overstepping the mark. He fascinated her on a level over which she had absolutely no control. She had never been tempted to consider behaving inappropriately before, but the glamorous duke had awoken a need deep inside her that coiled through her system in heated waves. Clio felt a whimsical desire to be kissed by a man who would doubtless be a master in the art of seduction.

And to learn what happened next.

How could she be so attracted to a man whom she suspected of plotting a murder? Not that she *did* seriously suspect him. She knew what she had heard but not in what context the words had been spoken. He had assured her that he wasn't planning to kill anyone, and she believed him.

She believed him because she wanted it to be true and because she had convinced herself that he would not deliberately deceive her, even if he was acting in a secret capacity of some description or other on behalf of the government. She believed him because he had given her his word, and to a man of his stature his word would be sacrosanct. His conscience would not allow for any equivocation in that regard.

Even so, Clio mused, she would be most interested to learn why he had been conducting a private conversation about murder with his valet in the tack room. Surely such a conversation could have been more conveniently conducted in the privacy of his chamber. Questions without answers continued to rattle around inside Clio's head. Questions that she had no right to contemplate. If she was satisfied that he had not come here with the intention of killing a person, then his business was…well, none of hers.

'Face it,' she said aloud, 'he fascinates you and you are looking for ways to involve yourself with him.'

That was undeniably true, but he had returned the favour by making sure that she escaped the captain's clutches when he need not have done so. He had followed her out onto the terrace with the obvious intention of speaking with her. He had smiled and laughed with her in a manner that she hadn't seen him employ with anyone else present.

Perhaps he simply wanted to ensure that she wouldn't repeat what she had overheard and was courting her good opinion for that reason. Her pride took a denting at that very real possibility, until she adjured herself to be sensible. She was not on the prowl for a husband—she was far too young to contemplate tying herself down for the rest of her life. If she did marry, she wanted to enjoy herself first. Besides, even if she had been intent upon matrimony, the duke was so far above her in the social order that she could easily develop a permanent crick in her neck from looking up at him.

Thus resolved and in control of her emotions—at least after a fashion—she privately conceded that he was by far the most handsome, ruggedly alluring, sophisticated and fascinating gentleman of her acquaintance. She would enjoy his company whenever he chose

to bestow it upon her, using it as a means to avoid Captain Salford until such time as she was ready to confront him, but she would not get carried away with fanciful notions.

Clio was unsure how long she sat there, lost in a reverie, reliving each of her exchanges with the duke, conscious of the warm glow that he had inspired deep within her core spreading to the outermost reaches of her body. The voices from below began to fade. The party was winding down and Clio crossed the room and climbed into her bed.

Sleep took its time to claim her, but she was up with the dawn, ready for her early ride, which had become a solitary tradition. Without ringing for Daisy, Clio washed in cold water and dressed in her summer habit—a relatively flimsy garment made from red twill. She tied her hair back and didn't bother with a hat. No one would be around to see her and she would enjoy having the park to herself.

'Good morning, miss.' The head groom tugged his forelock as he observed Clio's approach. 'Wasn't sure if you'd be up early this morning, what with the party going on so late, but Raven is tacked up and ready for you just in case.'

'You know I wouldn't allow the small inconvenience of a late night to interrupt what is really important, Jed.'

'I reckon I do, miss.'

Another groom led a restless Raven from his stall. The gelding, whose shiny black coat was responsible for his name, pranced sideways and whinnied when he saw Clio.

'It's all cupboard love,' she told her horse, kissing his soft muzzle. 'You don't fool me. All you want is this carrot,' she added, producing the desired vegetable, which she had appropriated from the kitchen as she passed through it earlier, from her pocket. The gelding consumed it with surprising delicacy. Clio waited until he had finished his treat and then stood on the mounting block. 'If you are quite ready,' she said, taking up the reins and slipping into the saddle.

Raven put in his customary buck as they left the yard, but Clio was ready for him and he failed to unseat her.

'I can sense that you are fresh and ready to kick up your heels,' she said, conducting what had become a customary one-sided conversation with her horse. 'Shall we head for the old priory?' she asked, turning Raven in that direction and digging her heel into his flank. Raven responded with another buck and took off at a gallop.



The party lost its allure for Ezra as soon as Clio left it. He felt relief out of all proportion to the brief nature of their acquaintanceship when he saw her reach the safety of the upper landing without being pursued by Salford. He eyed his nemesis with deep suspicion as he sauntered around the room, hands clasped behind his back, looking to the casual observer as though he had nothing more taxing on his mind than enjoying himself.

But Ezra knew him better than that. He had seen him lose his temper with enlisted men during their time in the army, and he could tell by the manner in which Salford's smile showed signs of strain that he had not expected Clio to reject his advances. He had underestimated the chit's determination to make her own decisions, Ezra suspected, and wasn't sure how to respond to her independent stance. He could not put *her* on a charge, as he had often done on a whim when he believed that a soldier had been insubordinate.

Salford enjoyed being in control, Ezra knew, and did not take opposition to his authority well. That made him dangerous and unpredictable, and Clio would require Ezra's protection, whether she realised it or not.

Ezra smiled when he considered her reaction to his arbitrary decision—a decision that gave him immense satisfaction, not just because he had a score to settle with Salford. God alone knew he had enough problems of his own to contend with, not least of which was avoiding the attentions of a would-be assassin. Be that as it may, he had decided to make the spirited Clio Benton his responsibility and she would soon learn that he could be as determined as her, and equally tenacious.

Some of the bolder ladies found excuses to capture Salford's attention. He handled them, Ezra conceded, with charm but his gaze constantly strayed to the staircase, as though he was actually contemplating pursuing Clio in that direction. *Just let him try it!*

Some men had no shame.

Ezra allowed himself a wry smile, thinking that description applied to him since he knew for a fact that he would have kissed the alluring Miss Benton had Salford not come upon them at such an inopportune time. Far from being grateful to the cad for reminding him of his manners, Ezra felt cheated out of an experience that he would have to be out of his mind to pursue. The chit intrigued him. He admired her individuality, her courage, her forthright manner and

the fact that she knew her own mind, despite her relative youth.

Or perhaps because of it.

He endured the party and the attentions of just about every female in the room for another hour. Satisfied that Clio would be safely tucked up in her bed by that time and aware that Salford was still working his charm here in the drawing room, he felt it safe to retire himself.

'God give me strength!' he cried in exasperation as he entered his room, shrugged out of his coat and threw it at Godfrey. Merlin, lying flat out in front of the open window, made do with flapping his tail before returning to his slumbers with a martyred sigh.

Godfrey chuckled. 'That bad, eh?'

'Worse, although there were some interesting developments.'

'I hear Salford has arrived,' Godfrey said, scowling. 'Everyone below stairs is talking about it. Seems they have him married off to your Miss Benton.'

'The devil they have!' Ezra raised his man's scowl with a more ferocious one of his own.

Godfrey chuckled. 'Don't worry, her maid knew nothing of any agreement between them and reckons her mistress tells her everything.'

Not everything, Ezra sincerely hoped, since he knew his behaviour on the terrace had not been particularly gentlemanly. If he had attempted it with just about any other female in attendance, her connections would have forced him down on bended knee, probably with some justification. His detractors might accuse Ezra of taking advantage of Clio's lack of male guardianship. He had heard it said that her trustees took scant interest in her wellbeing, satisfying themselves that she had been farmed out to relatives and leaving it at that. The thought of inadvertently exploiting her position gave him pause. Nothing could be further from the truth. Could it?

'She told me herself that she hadn't known he was coming. Nor does she seem to have any interest in him.'

'That won't go down well. You and I know that one don't take rejection lying down. She will need to have a care.' Godfrey picked up Ezra's discarded waistcoat and brushed it down. 'What I don't understand is why Salford is here. He must have known that you would be too. The whole district's been abuzz with the news, ever since you accepted your invite, according to the tattle below stairs. Salford knows you bear him a grudge following his denial of our accusations against him, but he'd have to be dicked in the nob if he

thinks he can somehow even the score against a man of your stature.'

'The same thought had occurred to me.' Or would have, Ezra supposed, had a certain siren not done her level best to muddle his thinking. Not that she had to do a great deal to achieve that ambition, other than to be anywhere near him. Dear God, he needed to have a care! He had not forgotten his reason for being here, and couldn't allow himself that kind of distraction. But then again he had vowed to keep her safe, and a promise was a promise.

'I suspect Miss Benton's fortune might be his real objective. He's probably in financial straits, and took it as read that she would accept him, based on nothing more than his close relationship with her father and the power of his toxic charm. Those considerations would make crossing my path a risk worth taking. Besides, he would be aware this was her first party and that she is due to come out next season. She's attractive and wealthy and so he couldn't risk someone else beating him to the prize, damn his eyes!'

'And you can't tell the world what you know about Salford's conduct without proof, I suppose,' Godfrey reasoned. 'He would be within his rights to call you out if you did such a thing.'

Ezra chuckled. 'He might be dissolute but he's no fool.'

'You could start a whispering campaign to discredit him.'

'I could if I was that underhanded.' Ezra scowled at his man. 'You appear to be mistaking Salford's character for my own.'

'Just playing devil's advocate,' Godfrey replied, unmoved by Ezra's asperity. 'All I'm saying is he could just be here for reasons that have nothing to do with his amatory ambitions.'

'You think he might be responsible for killing off my family members, and has me in his sights now?' Ezra nodded in response to his own question. 'The same possibility had occurred to me. It's just the sort of cowardly behaviour he would engage in, but I cannot think of any reason why he would take such a chance. Killing off dukes tends to be frowned upon, and is likely to draw attention to said duke's enemies.'

Godfrey rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. 'Everyone has their price. Salford came without a servant, which implies that he does indeed have pockets to let, so you could well be right about the reasons for his interest in your Miss Benton. Besides, you are his sworn enemy, given that you spoke out against his behaviour on the peninsular, damaging his reputation and his standing in the major general's eyes.'

'Even so, killing Richard, who was the duke at the time, and then

targeting me,' Ezra shook his head. 'That takes courage that no amount of blunt can manufacture, and you and I both know that Salford is basically a coward.'

'Personally, I still think that snake Silas is responsible for the deaths in your family,' Godfrey remarked. 'He comes across as weak and feeble because he is, at least physically. But he has more motivation than anyone to see the male line of the family die out.'

'Because my dear mother depends upon him? He has made himself indispensable to her. He flatters and clucks around her like a mother hen and she laps it up.'

'My point precisely.'

'True, but don't forget her lover, Brennan. Mother would have no need to hide their relationship if I ceased breathing. Not that she hides it especially well now, but with me out of the way I could see him moving into Wickham Hall before I'm cold in my grave.'

'Blimey!' Godfrey blinked. 'You think Brennan might be wiping you out one by one to get control of the Wickham fortune.'

'Men have killed for considerably less,' Ezra replied, pulling his shirt over his head and shrugging out of it. 'The title would die out, and I assume the crown would reclaim all lands attaching to it, but there would still be a lot left for a profligate like Brennan to squander.'

'You don't like him?'

'I don't care about him one way or the other. I don't have anything to do with him, but if he keeps the mater satisfied…' Ezra sighed. 'If however I discover that he is behind these unexplained deaths—'

'Including your father's? I know you were highly suspicious of his sudden illness.'

'As were his doctors. He was as healthy as a horse before he got struck down by some mysterious ailment. Most likely poison, although I cannot get them to admit it.'

'Poison is a woman's preferred method.'

'Well, I don't think mother killed him, although God alone knows he gave her enough reason to. She never showed us boys much affection, nor did she take any interest in our achievements. She is, however, very conscious of her position, which she enjoys. She is cold but not heartless and wouldn't kill off her sons, thereby bringing it all crashing down. My mother always puts her own comforts first, as well you know.'

‘You’re missing the point. Brennan might have made her promises about the glittering life they could lead together if she was free to take it up. Women can be impressionable, even those who are old enough to know better.’

Ezra shrugged. ‘I had Brennan and Silas in my sights. Now we must add Salford to the mix.’

Godfrey chuckled. ‘Which will give you an excuse to also keep Miss Benton in those sights.’

‘The chit has spirit and interests me for that reason. All the others are deadly dull and predictable, but she bucks the trend. For one so young, it’s refreshing. She knows how to conduct an intelligent conversation as well, which is considerably more than can be said for her admittedly pretty cousin. But she is also almost half my age. I mustn’t lose sight of that fact.’

‘Heaven forbid!’

Ezra sent his man a darkling glance.

‘I got the impression from a few snippets her maid let slip that she’s been left to her own devices with just a governess for company for more or less all of her life. Her father had little time for a daughter. When he wasn’t soldiering, he was busy managing his investments, but at least he left his child well provided for. Did more for her in death than he ever did in life, according to the obliging Daisy, whose lips were loosened after a few glasses of porter.’

‘As long as that’s all you loosened.’

Godfrey gave a belly laugh. ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’

‘Not especially, no. Just don’t forget what you are supposed to be finding out below stairs. Your primary purpose is to keep me alive, not chase after the maids.’

‘I shall endeavour to oblige.’

Ezra laughed as he climbed between the sheets. ‘Get out of here!’ he said.

Merlin abandoned the open window, jumped onto the bed beside Ezra and fell asleep in seconds, his gentle snores reverberating through his body. But Ezra, his mind overflowing, knew that for him sleep would be longer in coming.



Chapter Six

An exhilarating, flat-out gallop soon cleared the cobwebs from Clio's head. She drew rein when she reached a rise in the ground and pushed the tangle of hair away from her eyes. Her ribbon had slipped and Daisy would complain about having to get rid of all the knots in the tresses that fell to her waist in an unruly jumble. Clio patted Raven's sweaty neck beneath the thick mane that reached his shoulder and gloried in the magnificent vista that had opened up in front of her —a view of which she would never tire.

'It puts it all in proportion, don't you think?' she asked Raven, who seemed more interested in dropping his head and cropping at the grass than he did in the natural beauty of his surroundings. 'We are all of us so small and inconsequential in comparison to this.' She waved one arm in a wide arc. 'We did right to accept my aunt's offer to stay with her. I was worried that I might cause an upheaval, but unlike my Welsh relations Aunt Fletcher has shown me nothing but kindness. And Adele is the sister I never had. Things have a way of working themselves out and I would have nothing to worry about were it not for Captain Salford and his ridiculous expectations. I wish my aunt had asked me before inviting him, but I expect she thought she was doing me a kindness and that I would enjoy the surprise.'

Clio pushed Raven forward into a trot as she continued on the track to the old priory, a relic from the Tudor age when Henry VIII sacked the monasteries and stripped them of their valuables. Clio had been told that it was haunted, but she had seen no evidence of the ghosts of any discontented monks. Instead she found the ruined cloisters restful. They gave her sanctuary when she required solitude.

Accustomed to their routine, Raven seemed content when she tied his reins to a low branch and left him to crop at the grass once more. It was a fine morning and so Clio stripped off her gloves and threw back her head to embrace the day as she clambered over the buried

remains of old walls to reach her perch in the cloister. She seated herself on a worn stone and enjoyed the view, emptying her mind and allowing the peace of her surroundings to envelop her. She was assured of privacy since no one else ever came up here.

Except that today, it seemed, they did.

The sound of a horse being ridden fast reached her ears and she sighed, hoping that Captain Salford had not somehow managed to follow her to this secluded spot with the intention of bullying her into acquiescence. She tapped her riding crop aggressively against the adjoining rock.

'Let him try it!' she muttered.

She realised her mistake when the horse drew nearer and an involuntary gasp slipped past her guard. The duke, in shirtsleeves, sat astride the magnificent black stallion she had noticed in the stables that morning, his long hair flying out behind him. He and the spirited horse made a magnificent sight, especially with his dog loping along beside them. What were the chances of him taking the same route as her by accident, she wondered? Next to none, she decided. He must have deliberately followed her, but for what purpose?

'What is he doing here?' she asked aloud, ignoring the fact that her heart rate had accelerated and her cheeks felt unnaturally warm. The prospect of being alone with the duke filled her with a very different emotion to that engendered by the possibility of Salford's presence. He was one of the few people who could invade her favourite spot without Clio raising objections.

He reined his stallion in, tied him to a branch a safe distance away from Raven, shaded his eyes against the sun and smiled up at her.

'May I join you?' he asked.

'Do I have a choice in the matter?' she replied ungraciously, wondering why her instinct was to be short with him. Perhaps, she decided, because no one else tended to be. Besides, he had sought her out. It wasn't as though she had somehow enticed him here.

'Apparently not,' the duke said, as Merlin scampered up to her, demanding attention. She smiled at him as she obliged, pointedly ignoring the duke while she waited for her erratic heartbeat to settle into a more natural rhythm. She glanced at him as he stretched his long legs and easily covered the distance between them without stumbling over the rugged ground. 'May I?' he asked, indicating the rock beside hers.

'I believe that seat is free.'

'I saw you from the window and followed you, in case you are

wondering,' he admitted, glancing at her profile. 'I hope you do not mind.'

'This is a favourite destination for Raven and me,' she replied. 'It is so peaceful. I feel that I can breathe up here.' She threw back her head and closed her eyes as she filled her lungs with sweet, fresh air. 'No one else ever comes this way.'

'Then I am disturbing your reverie,' he said, making to stand.

'You are disturbing me, but it doesn't follow that the disturbance is unwelcome, and there is no need for you to leave. I don't know why I am being such a crosspatch.' She plucked at a blade of grass, unable to meet the penetrating gaze that she felt burning into her profile. 'Take no notice of me. I am not myself.'

'Because of Salford?'

'Yes, in part.' Merlin had run off to investigate but returned with his tongue hanging out and flopped down beside her. She tugged at his ears. 'I wish I knew why he had come and what he expects from me, since I do not believe he feels any particular affection for me. Nor is he fulfilling my father's wishes, as he is trying to make me believe. Anyway, whatever it is, I sense that he will not give up easily.'

'I concur. I believe he intended to follow you upstairs when you left the party, which implies a degree of urgency on his part. I made sure that you were not inconvenienced.'

'Thank you.' Clio ran her lower lip through her teeth, contemplating this revelation. 'His desperation concerns me, I won't deny it.'

'The man is not to be trusted.'

'Really?' She sent him a sweetly sarcastic smile. 'I appreciate that I am a feeble female, incapable of rational thought, but even I had managed to reach that conclusion.'

The duke chuckled. 'There is nothing feeble about you.'

They fell into momentary silence, the dog's panting and the bits jangling in the horses' mouths the only disturbance. In the distance a crow cawed and then took flight with a loud clatter of wings. The distant village clock struck the quarter and one of the horses snorted.

'A former monastery, one assumes,' the duke said, glancing around at the crumbling cloisters. 'Is it part of Lady Fletcher's estate?'

'No, I believe it was at one time but parts of the land have been sold off over the centuries. Death duties and what have you, so I have been told.'

'Very likely. It is a common problem.' He smiled at her. 'There's

something you want to ask me.'

It wasn't a question, and Clio was irrationally annoyed because he appeared capable of reading her mind. Surely she wasn't that transparent? 'What are you now?' she snapped. 'Clairvoyant?'

He chuckled. 'You are very bad at disguising your emotions.'

'I have never had reason to do so before now, not really. Besides, I believe in plain speaking. There is less chance of being misunderstood if one speaks one's mind.'

'I almost feel sorry for poor Captain Salford.' The duke's smile broadened and Clio felt at ease with him, convinced that he was at least trustworthy. She found him compelling – along with just about every female under the age of ninety who crossed his path, she surmised with a wry smile. The fact that he had deliberately followed her to this deserted spot implied that he genuinely desired her company. It was an honour that the majority of young women who were still asleep in the house would have given ten years of their lives to secure. Did he feel it unnecessary to worry about the proprieties insofar as she was concerned, or did he harbour more sinister motives?

Clio upbraided herself for being so foolish. The Duke of Wickham did not, she was absolutely sure, need to resort to seducing innocent young women if it was the pleasures of the flesh that he desired. There were several older and not unattractive chaperones in attendance who would doubtless be pleased to oblige him in that respect. She had noticed one in particular making her availability plainly apparent the previous evening with small gestures, a touch of his forearm, a flirtatious smile.

He still appeared to be waiting for her to ask her question. But would he give her an honest answer, or fob her off with half-truths? Clio abandoned her annoying habit of analysing everything to death and decided to ask him anyway.

'Tell me to mind my own business, if you like,' she said, fixing him with a direct look for the first time since he had joined her, 'but I would dearly love to know why you and Mr Godfrey found it necessary to discuss murder in my aunt Fletcher's tack room.'



The sight of Clio, with her flowing tangle of hair, sitting in a distracted state among the ruins of a centuries-old monastery had

taken Ezra's breath away. From a distance she had looked ethereal, unapproachable, and Ezra knew he was intruding on a personal moment. She had a right to privacy and he might have found the strength to turn away—anything was possible—but for the fact that Merlin felt no such qualms about respecting her solitude and went bounding up to her, his tail spiralling. Besides, she had already seen him, so her peace would have been disturbed anyway. She might think he was cutting her deliberately if he turned away again, and nothing could be further from the truth.

Her remote greeting made it apparent that the intrusion was not especially welcome, a situation so unprecedented for a man in his position that it was refreshing. She didn't go so far as to ask him to leave and so Ezra sat beside her, content to bide his time.

'It's peaceful here,' he remarked.

'It's a favourite haunt of mine.'

'I can quite understand why.' Ezra smiled at her but she was staring straight ahead and the gesture was wasted. 'Is it actually haunted?'

She laughed and this time she did spare him a fleeting glance. 'What a strange question.'

'Not so very strange if you believe that there is a life after this one and that wronged souls occupy the site of the wrongdoing in question. This is obviously an ancient monastery, so it's easy to imagine all manner of evil deeds taking place here. As to who committed them… well, that's another matter entirely.'

'You do not have a high opinion of religion?'

'I think it has a lot to answer for, certainly. As to a life hereafter, personally I think it arrogant to assume that anyone can know for a certainty what comes next unless they have experienced it first hand—which given their safe and comfortable lives tends to exclude the clergy.'

'And yet one hears stories of people recognising places they have never set foot in before, or finding themselves able to speak fluently in a foreign tongue they have never been taught.' She sent him a curious look. 'How do you explain such things?'

Ezra shook his head. 'I cannot.'

'You do not believe that we are born again in different guises?'

'I would like to think so, obviously, but I have an enquiring mind that raises objections on the grounds of hearsay and so I cannot take anyone's word as gospel without corroborating proof.'

‘Not even that of the clergy?’

He smiled. ‘Especially not theirs.’

‘If we live by God’s tenets then we are assured eternal life in heaven. Surely that is why we attend church so regularly.’ Clio smiled. ‘Are you sure you want to risk eternal damnation?’

‘It must be getting a mite crowded up there, don’t you think?’

She laughed. ‘Perhaps.’

‘A life hereafter is what the church *wants* us to believe in and, as you say, it guarantees regular Sunday worship and a steady income. That way, the clergy are able to occupy the moral high ground and look down upon us lesser mortals, while simultaneously doing exactly as they please, all in the name of God, naturally.’

‘I am sure you are being sacrilegious.’ Clio threw back her head and closed her eyes for an expressive moment. ‘And in such a place, too. However, you have more reason than most. I expect you are thinking of your dead brothers and hoping that they will have a better time of it if they are reincarnated, which is understandable. As is your cynicism regarding the church, given that your family has suffered so many tragedies.’ When she opened her eyes again her gaze had been softened by compassion. ‘I am very sorry about that. Life is seldom fair but if one seeks explanations for its random acts of unkindness then one is likely to lose one’s senses.’

‘Thank you. Not many people dare to broach that particular subject, or stop to consider my feelings on the matter.’

She grinned. ‘I try never to be predictable—and besides, it is the most natural thing in the world to express sympathy for a situation that was not of your making. I am sure you didn’t expect to become duke, and even if you enjoy your elevated status I doubt whether you would have wished to assume it at the cost of your brothers’ lives.’

Ezra bowed his head. ‘How well you appear to understand me.’

‘I am a student of human nature. The manner in which people react to a particular situation fascinates me. Take last night in my aunt’s drawing room, for example. I watched the ladies being drawn to you like a moth to flame and I wondered how you could stand it.’ She sighed. ‘It all seemed so clinical. If this is what I have to look forward to when I am presented next year—a marriage mart that more closely resembles a cattle mart, I mean—then perhaps I shall spare myself that indignity.’

‘And deprive the *ton* of the pleasure of your presence?’

Clio smiled and waved the compliment aside. ‘I am not sure that I like the idea of matrimony, at least not at any cost, so it seems like an

unnecessary torment. I did promise my cousin Adele that we would go through it together though, and I cannot break my word.' She turned towards him with a capricious smile. 'However, your friend Lord Fryer seemed very taken with Adele last night. If you could persuade him to offer for her than I would be released from my promise.'

Ezra laughed. 'I would happily oblige, but for the fact that my friend falls in love on a weekly basis. Charming as your cousin appears to be, I'm afraid that I am unable to guarantee his constancy and cannot therefore recommend him as suitable husband material.'

'How very disobliging of him.' She sighed and threw up her hands. 'Perhaps someone else will come along and fall for Adele's myriad charms before next season commences. One can but hope.'

They fell into a momentary silence, which Clio eventually broke. 'You asked if this site is haunted. Can you sense a presence? I have always thought that I could, but it is not malevolent, which is what draws me here. There again, perhaps that feeling is simply a product of my over-active imagination and I use it as an excuse to return here frequently. However, I don't suppose ghosts from centuries past were the reason for your private discussion with Mr Godfrey.'

And so, Ezra thought, they returned to the substance of her earlier question. He had hoped to distract her but had clearly failed. She was a determined little minx and he knew that a haughty ducal reprimand for eavesdropping would not have the desired effect. He must tell her something, if only to prevent her from speaking publicly about what she had heard and misinterpreted.

'Godfrey and I were attempting to decide who is out to kill me,' he said, surprising himself by settling upon the absolute truth.

'Kill you?' She blinked at him, looking dumbfounded. 'Someone here at this party wants you dead?'

'Whether or not the person is here is open for debate,' Ezra replied, watching a frown creep across her forehead. 'But what is beyond question is that if I do not find and stop him first then I am likely to meet the same fate as my father and brother.'

'You think they were both deliberately killed?' she asked, her mouth agape.

'My brother was, without a doubt. It was made to look like an accident, but it was clumsily done. I was with the army at the time so I wasn't here to ask the right questions. By the time I returned, the matter had been investigated by the local magistrate and a decision reached that it had been an accident. He fell from his horse and broke his neck.'

‘You do not believe it?’ she asked, touching his arm.

‘Not a word of it,’ Ezra replied, covering her small hand with one of his own.

Clio glanced up at him, eyes wide, and withdrew her hand. ‘I am so very sorry,’ she said, tears swamping her eyes.

‘There, now I have made you cry, sweet Clio, and that was not my intention.’

He had been addressing her informally inside his head and did so aloud now without conscious thought. She raised no objections.

‘Life is so cruel,’ she said simply.

‘Richard was an expert horseman and had been seen by one of our keepers moments before the supposed accident, trotting along a fence line. The story goes that a shot was fired which spooked Richard’s horse, but the keeper is convinced it didn’t happen that way. Richard was riding an old favourite of his who seldom spooked at anything.’

‘Did the keeper not give evidence at the inquest?’

‘He was never called.’ Ezra threw back his head. ‘Someone in a position of authority ensured that he kept what he had seen to himself. When I asked, I was told by the magistrate himself that since the keeper hadn’t seen Richard actually fall, his evidence would have been of little value.’

‘Do you think he was bribed?’

‘The possibility occurred to me, but I dismissed it. The magistrate has been in his position for two decades and is generally respected as being fair. He has earned a reputation for dealing in facts alone and getting to the truth. He’s right that if our keeper didn’t actually see the accident then he couldn’t swear on a bible that the horse wasn’t spooked,’ Ezra said, attempting to be fair himself. ‘Horses *are* unpredictable.’

‘Who fired the shot?’

Ezra sent her an approving look. ‘A very astute question, and one to which I haven’t been able to find a satisfactory answer. No more could the magistrate. One assumes that if one of our keepers had fired he would have made that admission.’

‘Not necessarily. Not if his having done so resulted in the death of a duke.’

Ezra acknowledged the point with an inclination of his head. ‘Even so, the keepers’ whereabouts at the time has been established beyond doubt. It wasn’t one of them. It could easily have been a poacher, but of course no poacher has ever been found or his presence

on the estate that day established, which is why the magistrate was unable to rule that the killing had been unlawful.'

Clio absorbed that information for a moment or two without speaking. 'What happened to your father?' she asked eventually.

'Again, I was not here, but all the signs point to deliberate poisoning misdiagnosed as food poisoning. I might have accepted that view but for the fact that my mother, my cousin Silas and several guests all ate the same thing that evening but only the pater was struck down. The others suffered no ill-effects. They tried to tell me that a rogue oyster might have been the culprit. I have heard of it happening and might have believed it, had it not been for Richard's accident occurring so quickly afterwards.'

'Goodness, someone really doesn't like your family.' Clio closed her eyes and swallowed. 'Two brothers and a father dead. I can quite see why you are so concerned.'

'My elder brother died of natural causes. That at least has never been in question. He was sickly from the cradle. Nothing could be done to ease the congestion on his lungs and no one was surprised when he caught a summer chill and succumbed to his ailments. It was almost a relief. He had no quality of life.'

'If your father was poisoned,' Clio said in a considering fashion, 'then the poisoning had to have been carried out by someone who had access to him or his food, which points the finger at your own family members, or a senior servant.'

'Precisely.'

'Have any attempts been made on your own life?' she asked. 'Is there something that proves beyond doubt in your own mind that the previous deaths were not the accidents they were made out to be?'

'I was set upon in London recently but managed to fight my assailant off.'

'Not a very efficient attacker then.'

'Wishing me dead?' he asked with mock severity.

'It was merely an observation. One would imagine that a rogue with murderous intent would be better prepared and not so easily deterred. Anyone willing to kill a duke would, I assume, be a proficient assassin, prepared for his victim to fight back.'

'It would have had to look like an accident, and the man very nearly succeeded,' Ezra admitted with a wry smile. 'If I had not been on my guard, and if I had not seen a movement in the periphery of my vision moments before he launched his attack then things could have worked out very differently.'

‘You do hear of wealthy men being set upon in London after dark, if they are foolish enough to stroll about unprotected.’

Ezra sent her an amused glance, wondering if she realised quite how much he enjoyed her spirited retorts. No one in his recollection had ever spoken to him so brazenly, certainly not since he had become duke. ‘Are you accusing me of being a dullard?’

‘Certainly I am. You are aware that someone wants you dead and you have responded by making it easier for them to bring that situation about. If that is not the height of lunacy or arrogance, then I do not know what is.’

Ezra chuckled. ‘No one has ever dared to refer to me as a lunatic before.’

‘If the cap fits,’ she replied with a sweet smile. ‘What else has this mystery assailant done to arouse your suspicions?’

‘Pharaoh is a new acquisition,’ he said, nodding towards his stallion.

‘He’s magnificent.’

‘I thought so too, and he agrees with us both.’ They laughed. ‘He was a bargain at Tattersall’s because he has a reputation for depositing his riders on the ground.’

She sighed. ‘And you couldn’t resist the challenge, of course.’

‘Where’s the fun in riding a docile beast? I know you agree with me because I can see that your gelding is a lively animal and is probably considered unsuitable as a lady’s mount.’

‘Well…’ Her eyes glistened with amusement. ‘Even so, if Pharaoh tried to evict you from the saddle, no one would think anything of it.’

‘Especially if the stitching attaching the reins to the bit had been cut almost all the way through.’

‘Ah, that does point to a deliberate act. Did you take a bad fall?’

‘Thankfully, my head groom is diligent and noticed the sabotage. It would be relatively easy for a stranger to slip into the tack room while the grooms were about their business and the work of a moment to cut the stitching. I trust all my grooms and have no idea where to look for answers.’

‘So you came to this party, made sure the world knew you had accepted the invitation, and now are waiting for someone to strike again.’ She scowled at him. ‘Has it occurred to you that he might succeed on this occasion?’ She shook her head in exasperation, not waiting for a reply. ‘I cannot decide if you are reckless, desperate or completely insane.’

He chuckled, moved by her obvious concern for his wellbeing. ‘It seems to me that I can either spend the rest of my days looking over my shoulder or else make plans to draw the killer out.’ He sent her a challenging look. ‘What would you do in my situation?’

‘Well,’ she replied pensively. ‘I suppose, when you put it like that…’

Ezra gave in to temptation, picked up a strand of her hair and ran it repeatedly through his fingers. ‘Precisely.’

‘Stop that!’ She pulled her hair free of his fingers. ‘I cannot think coherently when you distract me by being provocative.’

‘Perhaps I enjoy being provocative.’

‘I suspect that you rather enjoy living too, but that situation will not endure if you continue to behave with such little regard for your own wellbeing.’

‘No one can get to me here, on Lady Fletcher’s land, not unless I want them to. I will see them coming a mile off.’

‘I told you earlier that this is not part of the Fletcher estate.’

‘So you did.’ He raised a brow and shrugged.

‘I rest my case, at least insofar as your cavalier approach to your own welfare is concerned.’ She huffed. The gesture caused her breasts to swell as they fought against the confines of her habit. Ezra’s eyes were drawn to the sight and he found it hard to look away again. ‘This monastery was occupied by monks from the Benedictine order, who were apparently dedicated to a balanced life filled with work and prayer. Quite what happened to this particular order once the monastery was sacked is unknown. I would like to think that they fled to a more liberally-minded land.’

‘There is no such thing, at least in religious terms. Every faith I have studied insists that it worships the one true god and that all the others are infidels. The Catholics are no better than anyone else in that regard. In fact, they can be downright cruel. Haven’t you heard of the Inquisition?’

‘Of course I have.’ She conceded the point with a tilt of her head. ‘And for your information, you left the confines of the Fletcher estate about a mile behind you. Not that you will be especially safe there since there are no end of places where people can gain access. I have mentioned it to my aunt but since my uncle’s death she has left everything to do with the estate’s management to her steward and probably doesn’t spare it a thought. Her priority is to marry her daughters off, and you are expected to oblige in that regard by admiring my cousin Beth, who has quite the sweetest nature

imaginable, to say nothing of a lovely face.'

'She is a vision.'

Clio shook her head at his diplomatic response. 'Clearly, my aunt has set her sights too high.'

'When it comes to my own wellbeing,' Ezra said, keen to turn the subject away from his own matrimonial ambitions, or lack thereof, 'I shall just have to depend upon Merlin to protect me.' They both glanced at the snoozing dog and simultaneously burst out laughing.

'Whom do you suspect of wanting you dead and why?' she asked, her expression sobering. 'Who succeeds to the title if you are no more?'

'No one, that is the problem,' Ezra replied. 'I have no other male relatives who could possibly raise a legitimate claim.'

'So the title and its properties would revert to the crown.'

'Precisely so, but there is a substantial family fortune independent of the duchy.'

'Ah-ha! Your maternal cousin, Mr Conway, will doubtless harbour expectations in that regard.'

'I can see that you have already taken his measure.'

'As I say, I enjoy watching people.'

'Silas makes himself useful to my mother and in so doing assures himself of a comfortable living, but he is incapable of violence. He almost faints at the sight of blood.'

'Don't underestimate him. All that business with the handkerchief is for show. He wants people to see him as a harmless fop and to underestimate his ambitions. I noticed him several times last night, watching you with a bitterness that he couldn't properly disguise.'

'I have never seen it.'

'Which is precisely why you underestimate him. You see what he wants you to see, but I don't doubt for a moment that the man possesses a calculating character. You are everything that he is not and never will be. Human nature being what it is, he naturally resents you for a situation that is none of your making. You did not ask to be born tall and strong and handsome and sought after and…'

He was charmed by the manner in which she blushed when she unintentionally, he was sure, blurted out what she was thinking. 'Why, thank you!'

'Ridiculous man! That was not intended as a compliment. It was a simple observation based on my understanding of human nature. We

all aspire to be what we never can be. Anyway, when he was looking at you with a combination of envy and something more sinister, you had your back to him. I wondered about it at the time, but it makes more sense now.'

'Oh, Silas is aware that his tenure at Wickham Hall is dependent upon my continued approval of his presence. It's a situation which he pretends not to be concerned about, but which puts him on my list of suspects.'

'Who else is on it? Oh, come on, your grace, you can't clam up on me now that we are partners.'

Ezra flexed a brow. 'Partners? I do not recall agreeing to any sort of partnership.'

'Then why tell me all this?'

Ezra spread his hands, unable to think of a response.

'It is obvious to me that you require my help. I live here and no one takes any notice of my comings and goings. I hear all sorts of things without arousing suspicion. You, by comparison…well, your every move will be noticed and remarked upon.'

Ezra shook his head, knowing when he was beaten. 'If we are to be partners then you should call me Ezra, at least when we are alone. And to prevent you from torturing it out of me, I will admit that I suspect Lord Brennan, my mother's lover.'

'Ah, that would explain the sudden display of reticence.' She grinned at him. 'You thought my sensibilities would be offended by talk of lovers, but nothing could be further from the truth. Everyone knows about the shockingly liberal attitude among those who are married, which would be the ruination of someone in my situation.' She sniffed indignantly. 'Most unfair. Anyway, Adele and I make a game out of observing the couples who come here to dine, trying to guess who is involved with whom.'

'Do you indeed?' Ezra couldn't recall the last occasion upon which he had been so comprehensively entertained. 'How do you discover whether you have got it right?'

'You imagine, I suppose, that Lord Brennan would have no scruples in wiping out your family so that he can swoop in and help himself to the substantial spoils left behind.'

'It seems more likely than Silas being the culprit. Besides, if it is Silas then he would be unwittingly clearing the way for Brennan—a fact that will not have escaped his notice. Silas is many things, but stupid is not one of them.'

'There is something else.' She sent him a considering look. 'Tell

me.'

'I did wonder about the sudden appearance of my nemesis,' he said with patent reluctance.

'Captain Salford?'

Ezra nodded. 'The very same.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'It did not occur to you that he might actually have come in order to pay court to me.'

'Oh yes, he would be a fool not to,' he said softly, sending her an intimate smile imbued with a wealth of feeling. 'But is he doing so for the right reasons?'

'Killing two birds with one stone, I take it you mean.' Clio didn't appear to have taken serious offence at the suggestion. 'Earning a fat payday by bumping off a duke…'

'Except that he was not in the country when my brother died,' Ezra replied. 'We were both serving with the regiment at the time.'

'Which makes him an excellent choice to continue someone else's work, since you yourself can vouch for his whereabouts when your brother's death happened. There is a twisted sort of irony in the killer's choice of assassin, if that is the case.'

'Salford was constantly borrowing from his fellow officers, that much I do know, and had to be reminded of his obligations more than once,' Ezra said, 'which implies a permanent shortage of funds.'

'Even so, killing a duke…' She mangled her lower lip between her teeth. 'I cannot imagine how desperate he would have to be to take the risk.'

'Even a duke against whom he bears a massive grudge?'

'Well,' Clio said, getting to her feet and brushing down her habit, 'in that case, I had best make myself agreeable to him and complain about your high-handed manner. Then perhaps he will let something slip.'



Chapter Seven

Clio had lingered too long in the duke's company, making it seem as though she was encouraging his interest in her. If Beth wasn't to his liking, she reasoned, then she herself stood no chance. Not that she had any particular desire to impress him, but she would at least like to win his respect. Respect, yes, that was the best she could hope for.

'Slow down!'

His voice behind her caused her to turn sharply and her foot slipped from the worn stone she had placed it on. A strong arm circled her waist, preventing her from taking a tumble and twisting her ankle. She let out a startled little cry as her body collided with his and the air left her lungs in an extravagant whoosh.

'Careful,' he said, his voice as smooth as velvet as his breath peppered the top of her head and his dark eyes glowed with an unfathomable emotion. 'This place is rife with dangers.'

Clio was unable to find her voice but nodded, agreeing with him for reasons that probably didn't coalesce with his own thinking. He was slow to release her but when he did so he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and insisted upon conducting her back to the horses.

'I cannot help but wonder how I have managed to negotiate these stones so many times alone and not come to grief,' she said in a sweetly sarcastic tone.

'You will have to learn to accept gentlemanly gestures before you take yourself up to London for your season.'

'I will do no such thing!' she replied, thinking she probably sounded as immature as she felt at that moment, totally out of her depth when exchanging verbal barbs with this elegant sophisticate. And yet smiling and simpering and agreeing with every word he spoke simply wasn't her way, so she would be herself and let him think what

he liked. When she stumbled again, he took matters literally into his own hands by muttering something beneath his breath, sweeping her into his arms and carrying her the rest of the way as though she weighed nothing at all.

Clio was too astounded, too breathless, to raise any objections about his unorthodox conduct. He carried her effortlessly to the horses, at which point he set her back on her feet, looking smugly satisfied. Her legs were now so unsteady that she actually wondered if they would support her weight. Refusing to allow him to see that the gesture had affected her in any way, she merely nodded and reached for Raven's reins. But once again, he was ahead of her. He untied them himself and swung them over Raven's head.

'Easy, boy!' he adjured as the gelding shifted his quarters.

'He doesn't like impudent strangers,' Clio said. 'It is a trait that we share.' She patted Raven's neck as she wondered how to mount elegantly. Ordinarily she would stand on a rock but…'Oh!'

Once again, he lifted her, this time into her saddle, but he held onto Raven's reins close to the bit. 'I don't want you getting yourself into a compromising position with Salford on my account,' he said in a stern tone.

'I can assure you that there will be no compromising.' But the sting had left her tone because she could tell from his concerned expression that he was…well, concerned for her reputation.

'You cannot be sure of anything, since you are unaware of his intentions. I don't mean to insult you, but if it is just your fortune that attracts him then he is not only foolish but desperate too. I dare say he has pressing debts…'

'And he expects me, as an inexperienced chit without guidance to fall gratefully into his arms. Ha!' She tossed her head indignantly. 'In that case, he is destined for disappointment. However, I will have to speak with him at some point,' she said in a considering tone. 'Trust me to know how to handle him. I do not require your protection, your grace.'

'You think you do not, but the man is dangerous.' He grinned at her. 'However, part of me wonders if you actually crave that danger and excitement.'

'Part of you might be right about that,' she conceded.

He sighed. 'Reckless female!'

The duke—had he really invited her to address him as Ezra?—reclaimed his own horse and swung effortlessly into the saddle.

'We had best not ride back to the estate together,' Clio said. 'If we

are seen then it will raise eyebrows and leave me with awkward questions to answer.'

'Raising speculations concerns you?' He looked unconvinced. 'Since when did you let such paltry considerations influence you?'

'It is not my reputation that concerns me, but yours.'

'Mine?' He affected surprise that couldn't possibly be genuine. Surely he knew what she was referring to, but he obviously intended to embarrass her by making her spell it out. 'My aunt has plans for you and I would not have her think that I have scuppered them, which of course I have not. But I cannot convince her of that without telling her the real reason for our partnership, which obviously I cannot do without betraying your confidence.'

Aware that she was babbling, Clio abruptly stopped talking and pretended to concentrate upon guiding Raven across territory that he knew as well as she did and didn't require any help to negotiate. She probably sounded very young and unworldly to such a refined gentleman, she thought, wishing that she could impress him with her wit and lively conversation. She searched her mind for amusing anecdotes but found it to be uncharacteristically blank.

'Your aunt's plans are doomed to failure, I'm afraid.' His deep voice recalled her wandering attention as he held his stallion back and waited for her and Raven to join him. 'However, I shall not embarrass you unnecessarily, sweet Clio.'

'Behave yourself! We have agreed upon a strategy of sorts. I will help you to watch for men with murderous intent, and you have no need to charm me into compliance.'

'I have agreed that you can observe. You will anyway, so I see little benefit in withholding my approval in that regard. But I will not have you taking any risks.' He removed one hand from the reins and waggled a finger at her. 'I am perfectly capable of looking out for myself and cannot be worrying about your welfare too.'

'If you refer to the captain, then let me put your mind at rest. There is nothing he can say to persuade me to marry him. There are no threats or coercion he can employ, and he cannot take liberties here in the middle of a crowded house party.' She twitched her nose. 'Not that I would put it past him in other circumstances. He must be very desperate if he has settled his interest upon me, but—'

'Clio!' The duke threw back his head and sighed. 'If you continue to underestimate your charms then you will put yourself into the middle of the very danger that I am attempting to protect you from.'

'Let us reach an agreement, your grace. I will play my part, you

will play yours, and we will trust one another to know how to go about so doing. In other words, I will not worry about you and you will return the favour.'

He smiled. 'Have it your way.'

'If you take that fork there, to the right,' Clio said, pointing with her crop, 'it will return you to the stables by a circuitous route.'

'Then I shall do so, and look forward to seeing you this afternoon. I dare say your aunt has entertainments planned for our participation. But in the meantime, do not do anything rash or you will have me to answer to.'

'Rash? Me?' She adopted an arch expression. 'I think you have mistaken me for a daredevil, your grace.'

She could hear his rumbling laughter echoing behind her as she cantered away.

Clio had been out far longer than had been her intention, she realised, as she approached the house. The sound of voices coming from the terrace implied that the guests had stirred and ventured out of doors. She glanced up at the sky, thinking it must be well past the noon hour. Not fit to be seen with her tangled hair and flushed face, she slipped into the house through a side door and reached her room without encountering anyone. Daisy was waiting for her, sitting on the window seat engaged with her sewing.

'You were a long time,' she said, putting her work aside. 'I was getting worried. Goodness, what happened to you? Did you take a tumble?'

'I don't look *that* bad, do I?' Clio glanced in the mirror and gasped. Her hair resembled a bird's nest once more, tangled and in total disarray, and there was a smudge of dirt on her nose. Her cheeks were indeed flushed, which if one didn't know better could be put down to the exhilaration of her ride. But her sparkling eyes, brimming with infectious amusement, told a different story. God forbid that she had seemed so…well, so provocative and disreputable to the duke. Whatever must he have thought of her?

Daisy helped Clio to strip off and then provided hot water for a much-needed wash. When she was clean, her nose smudge-free, she submitted to the long and painful process of having her hair untangled, thinking she only had herself to blame for riding hatless as she half listened to Daisy's chatter about the goings-on below stairs.

Eventually her hair was restored to the type of order that Daisy insisted upon but seldom managed because Clio didn't have the patience to sit still long enough for her to achieve it. She had only just

finished a late breakfast and stepped into a pretty walking gown when Adele burst into the room.

'Ah, you're back. I came looking for you earlier.'

'I lost track of time.' Clio couldn't admit the truth, not even to Adele. Especially not to her. 'It's such a lovely day, and there didn't seem much point in rushing back when I knew everyone would still be asleep.' Clio thanked Daisy and dismissed her. 'Come and sit with me.' Clio lowered herself onto the window seat and patted the space at her side. 'I can see that you have something that you are bursting to tell me. Besides, I want to hear everything about you and Lord Fryer.' Clio pinched her cousin's cheek. 'He was very attentive last night, which shows great good judgement on his part.'

'Beth is dejected,' Adele said, 'and Mama is doing her best to comfort her.'

'What is she dejected about?' Clio asked, knowing very well.

'She doesn't think that she made a good impression upon the duke. He is so formidable that he intimidated her, and she got tongue-tied as a consequence. She forgot all the things she had endlessly practised saying to him inside her head and…well, she finished up not saying much of anything at all.'

'Even so, she is by far the prettiest girl here, so if she does not meet with his approval there is no hope for anyone. And as for not talking,' she added, thinking of her own outspokenness in the duke's presence earlier and blushing, 'we all know that young ladies are not supposed to be capable of forming opinions of their own, so I do not see how her reticence in that regard could have met with ducal disfavour.'

'Oh no, no one could ever accuse my sister of having decided opinions.'

They both laughed.

'Does Beth actually like the duke, or is she acting solely on my aunt's orders?' Clio asked after a short, reflective pause. If it proved to be the latter, then Clio would feel less guilty about occupying his attention, even if she had not done so with amatory intentions in mind.

'I think most of the ladies in the room last night were intimidated by him, not just Beth. All except Cora Marlow, who is a forward little madam who thinks far too highly of herself. I heard her crowing to her mother about how ineptly Beth had handled the duke and how much better she will do when her turn comes. Anyway, I understand why Beth felt unequal to the task. He does rather dominate, although I

don't suppose he does so on purpose. It's just his natural authority, his regal bearing and cultured style that gives one pause. But despite being daunted by his presence, all the ladies feel they have a duty to attract his interest. All except you and me, dearest. We are far too sensible and down to earth to harbour such lofty ambitions—but there is healthy competition, at least amongst the mothers and chaperones in that respect.'

'Which seems unfair. It would be perfectly possible for Beth to make a good marriage to a man who does not frighten her. However, enough of Beth. I dare say the duke will decide upon a wife without concerning himself with our speculations.' Clio turned towards her cousin and clasped her hand. 'I am more interested in your impressions of Lord Fryer.'

'Oh, Clio, I am so very pleased with him!' Adele's pretty eyes glowed. 'He is so well travelled, an excellent raconteur and so attentive. I will confess that I liked him very much, and I dare to hope that he likes me a little in return.'

'How could he not? But have a care, dearest, I have heard it said that his attentions can be fleeting. I would not have you build your hopes up only to have them dashed.'

'Wherever did you hear such a rumour?' Adele sent Clio a wary look. 'I am perfectly sure there is no truth in it and someone was simply being spiteful because they are jealous that Lord Fryer showed me so much attention.'

'I cannot recollect who told me.' Clio grinned. 'But even if it is true, someone must make him realise that he has finally met his heart's desire, and if he cannot see that for himself in short order then he does not deserve you.'

'Well, you are biased, and I know your warning was kindly meant. However, I shall not put myself forward today, and I shall see if Lord Fryer seeks me out. If he does not then I shall know that you are right about his fickle character and think of him no more.' Adele bounced on her seat. 'Anyway, I came to ask you about Captain Salford. He has created such a stir and set hearts afluttering. We were not at leisure to discuss his unexpected arrival last night, but I remain to be convinced that you knew nothing about it in advance. Come along, Clio, tell me everything. Has he proposed? Will you accept him? This is all so very interesting.'

'Sorry to disappoint you, my love, but there is no mystery. Well actually, there is. His arrival here and the assumptions he appears to be harbouring as far as I am concerned are both mysterious and presumptuous.' Clio sighed. 'I suppose I shall have to listen to

whatever he has to say in his own defence. I owe that much to my father, even though I cannot believe that the captain is acting with his prior knowledge and approval. Nor can I ask him, which is rather convenient from the captain's perspective. Anyway, you can be sure that I shall not be announcing my engagement to the captain and leaving you to make your curtsey to the *ton* alone. Not that you will have to, since I dare say Lord Fryer will have the good sense to go down on bended knee long before then and save himself from the torment of seeing you surrounded by a dozen suitable beaus.'

'If you are dead set against Captain Salford, then of course that is your decision, but don't feel that I will hold you to your promise about our coming out together if you have found your heart's desire.'

'I have not, but if you have then you can be sure that I will excuse you from our agreement.'

Adele glanced out the window and smiled. 'We ought to go down. Some of the guests are already gathering outside.'

Clio followed Adele's glance, and immediately noticed the tall figure of the duke in the middle of a cluster of gentlemen. As though sensing her watching him, he glanced up and their gazes briefly clashed. He inclined his head and Clio felt her cheeks warm as she imagined the lazy, appreciative and slightly irreverent smile gracing his lips that she had become familiar with. A smile that she hadn't noticed him employing with anyone other than her.

She turned away, adjuring herself not to get carried away with fanciful notions.



Chapter Eight

‘I thought the assassin must have succeeded, you were gone that long,’ Godfrey remarked in a matter-of-fact manner when Ezra returned to his room with Merlin panting at his heels.

‘I have enjoyed a charming conversation with Miss Benton,’ Ezra replied, stripping off his shirt and throwing it on the bed.

Godfrey chuckled as he poured hot water into the ewer. ‘Is that what they’re calling it this week?’

‘I told her everything.’

‘You did what?’ Godfrey looked up askance, appearing to forget the scalding water and pouring it over his own feet. ‘Damn it!’ He quickly jumped clear of the flow and put the jug aside. ‘Bit risky, wasn’t it?’

‘I don’t suspect her of being the killer, or of being associated with him.’

‘Even so, guv’nor, what made you do such a thing?’ Godfrey looked perplexed. ‘Everyone knows that women can’t keep secrets to save their lives. Word of your impending demise will have spread like wildfire by the end of the day, you just mark my words. It’s far too juicy a snippet for her to keep to herself.’

The moment Clio had left him, Ezra found himself pondering upon the wisdom of his candidness himself but wasn’t about to confess that the minx was a little too easy to confide in. Or that by sharing his concerns with her, he had assured himself of her continued company and would be in a position to defend her against unwanted advances. ‘She had decided to warn anyone I frowned upon that I might be about to kill him,’ Ezra said, rolling his eyes. ‘I wouldn’t put it past her either, so it seemed safer to tell her the truth. If an agent of the assassin’s is here, we don’t want him alerted to the fact that we’re on to him.’

‘You don’t have to justify yourself to me,’ Godfrey said, grinning.

‘Remind me to dismiss you for impertinence as soon as we return to Wickham Hall.’

‘She’s too young to be trusted with such a deadly secret,’ Godfrey insisted as Ezra plunged his face into the hot water, vigorously washing the smell of horses from his skin. ‘No good will come of it, you just mark my words. Personally, I reckon you’ve had a rush of blood to the head. Can’t think of any other reason why you would have taken the young lady into your confidence.’ When Ezra emerged, his hair dripping with water, and looked to his man for a towel, there was a broad grin gracing Godfrey’s face as he handed it to him. ‘Or there again, she’s a prime minx, as unconventional as she is spirited, so perhaps I can.’

‘She is not a horse!’ Ezra grabbed the towel and grunted. ‘You have a lively imagination and apparent disinterest in remaining gainfully employed.’

‘Well, what’s done is done, and we’ll just have to hope that the young lady realises how vital it is that she respects your confidence.’ Godfrey handed Ezra a clean shirt and he pulled it over his head. ‘The word below stairs is that she’s on the point of accepting Salford’s offer so she’ll have more important matters to occupy her mind.’

Ezra frowned. ‘For once, the servants’ hall has it wrong. She has as little time for the man as I do.’

‘Useful cover for an assassin though, don’t you think? Have the world think you’ve come a-courting and no one will give a passing thought to a more sinister motive.’

Ezra paused in the process of tying his neckcloth. ‘Indeed. I thought his telling Lady Fletcher that Miss Benton was expecting his declaration was a little brazen, even for him, but it had the desired effect and the lady is delighted to be playing Cupid.’

‘Word is that she issued an invitation to him, agreeing to keep it a secret because Salford wanted to surprise Miss Benton.’

‘Right, and I would suspect him, but for the fact that we know where he was when my brother and father died.’

‘Which means that whoever wants you dead so badly is going to a lot of time, effort and expense to cover his tracks, and is particularly ruthless.’ Godfrey shook his head, watching Ezra as he buttoned his waistcoat. ‘Have a care, your grace. You ain’t quite as invincible as you appear to think.’

‘I bleed like any other.’ Ezra gave a grim nod. ‘I am well aware of that. Did you find out anything to help narrow down the field of

suspects this morning?'

Godfrey grunted. 'Only that your cousin has been complaining about everything and running the servants ragged. There are draughts in his room, even though it's the height of summer, and he's afraid of catching a chill. His bed isn't aired properly and he is convinced that will result in the dreaded chill if the draughts do not, and so forth. Lady Fletcher's butler has lost all patience and given instructions that his bell should be ignored.'

'I do wonder if his making a nuisance of himself is somehow significant,' Ezra mused, absently tugging at one of Merlin's ears. 'He is complaining about insignificant matters that make him appear weak and ineffectual.' Ezra shared a dark look with his man. 'You and I know differently.'

'Hmm. I'd agree, but for the fact that he would be clearing a path for Brennan.'

'Who might well have given him certain assurances.'

'True enough.' Godfrey nodded thoughtfully. 'As things stand, Silas is entirely dependent upon your largesse, but if your mother tired of him then he knows he would have to find his own way. Perhaps he prefers the prospect of a settled future in which he can be lord of his own manor and complain about the draughts to his heart's content.'

'True enough. Keep a weather eye on him, Godfrey. Him and Salford. Use Arkwright to help you,' Ezra said, referring to his groom. 'He's dependable and discreet. I want to know everything that Silas and Salford get up to this afternoon.'

'Seems to me that if Salford has Miss Benton in his sights, then you'll be watching him for yourself.'

'You may depend upon it, but I might get waylaid.'

'That's something I can definitely depend upon.' Ezra followed his man's gaze and groaned when he noticed a bevy of young ladies gathered together on the lawns immediately below his window. One or two of them glanced up and he abruptly stepped back, but not before Lady Cora sent him a coquettish smile and waggled her fingers at him.

'Right, well I suppose I'd better hurl myself to the she-wolves,' he said, whistling to Merlin, who rose from a deep slumber and trotted happily along in Ezra's wake. 'Bite any of them who get too familiar,' he instructed his dog.

He stepped onto the terrace, where he was greeted by a group of gentlemen, Salford amongst them. Thinking there was safety in numbers, Ezra joined them and listened with half an ear to their

conversation, which centred around an early evening visit to the local tavern, prior to changing for dinner.

'How about you, Wickham?' someone asked. 'Will you join us?'

It was an invitation that Ezra would ordinarily seize with gratitude, a common ploy at events of this nature that permitted the eligible gentlemen a brief respite from the machinations of ambitious mothers.

'What, the locals not good enough company for you, Wickham?' Salford chided when Ezra hesitated.

'On the contrary, I shall of course be there.'

The conversation turned to horses and a proposed race later in the week. Ezra would participate in the race but had little to add to the current conversation and allowed both his mind and his gaze to wander, which is when he became conscious of someone watching him from the house. He glanced up and his gaze clashed with Clio's. No one was taking much notice of him, other than Salford, who followed the direction of Ezra's gaze and appeared surprised that it was Clio who held his attention.

Ezra inclined his head in an irreverent and proprietary manner, curious to see how Salford would respond. As he had supposed would be the case, Salford looked away and struck up a conversation with someone else. Salford wouldn't deliberately draw the attention of the company to Ezra's interest in the chit when he himself was supposed to have engaged her affections.

'Let the sport commence,' Ezra muttered beneath his breath.

'We are about to play pell-mell. I am sure you are familiar with the French game, your grace,' Lady Fletcher said, bustling up to join the gentlemen. 'Indeed, I believe it is often called croquet nowadays for some reason. I cannot keep track of all these new-fangled names. Anyway, gentlemen, please select your partners. The ladies would benefit from instruction, I have no doubt.'

'What a charming prospect,' someone remarked *sotto voce*, to a chorus of muted laughter.

Henry led the exodus and bowed before Adele Fletcher. Ezra permitted himself a half smile, thinking that his enthusiasm would please Clio, who had yet to present herself. Ezra felt half-inclined to hide himself away and wait for her arrival but as guest of honour he was obliged to play his part.

He enjoyed being contrary and so bowed in front of the least attractive female present, asking her to do him the honour of partnering him. The other females looked on in open-mouthed

astonishment, shaking their heads in bewilderment.

'I don't think you are supposed to ask me,' the lady, Miss Devonshire he thought her name was, remarked with wry amusement.

'One of the benefits of being a duke, Miss Devonshire, is that one can please oneself, and it would please me very much to partner you.'

'Fortunately for you, your grace, I understand that you have a reason for being civil and so shall not read more into your gesture than was intended by it. It must be terribly trying to be in your situation.' She smiled good-naturedly up at him. 'Now, how does one play this wretched game?'



Mark Salford hung back, watching with wry amusement as the duke disappointed his bevy of admirers by offering to partner the plainest girl in attendance. There was only one person whom Mark had the slightest intention of partnering and she had not yet come down. Where the devil was she? He had seen her watching from her chamber window a few moments ago, as had the duke. Mark had raised a hand in greeting but if she had seen him, she hadn't acknowledged the gesture. He did not at all like her independent state of mind; she was far too young to have become such a deep thinker. Not that the fairer sex were capable of particularly deep thought, but that was beside the point.

He tapped his foot, aware that several ladies still wanted for partners and were casting encouraging glances in his direction. Just when good manners were on the point of forcing him to select one of them, Clio emerged from a side door, looking fresh and vibrant in a becoming gown of pale blue sprigged muslin, a parasol tipped at a jaunty angle over one shoulder. She really had become quite attractive in an unconventional manner, he thought. Perhaps marriage to her wouldn't be such drudgery after all.

'Clio, there you are.' He smiled at her and raised his hat, fully expecting his greeting to be warmly reciprocated now that she'd had an opportunity to become accustomed to his presence and appreciate being noticed by him.

'Should you not be playing?' she asked, walking straight past him.

'I was waiting for you to partner me.' Perdition, how dare she be so dismissive of his attentions! Didn't she realise just how fortunate she was? Seemingly not, but Mark never backed away from a

challenge and was damned if she'd get the better of him. He would have her yearning for a kind word, a look, a touch, before he was done with the impertinent miss, and long before they exchanged vows.

'There are enough players. I don't intend to join in.'

'Excellent! We shall walk instead.'

She seemed annoyed to have made life easy for him, but she fell into step beside him, ignoring his proffered arm, as he moved away from the croquet lawn. She tilted her head so that she was looking slightly away from him, acknowledged one or two of the ladies as they passed them by but made no effort to instigate a conversation.

'You have grown up since we last met,' he remarked, wincing at the banality of the comment. He ought, he belatedly realised, to have prepared better and come up with a compliment, but he had been so sure that she would have come to her senses…

'Why are you really here?' she asked. 'And please don't pretend that you are madly in love with me and asked my father's permission to address me, since I shall not believe you.'

'Even if it is true.'

'It is not, Captain Salford. You just now remarked that I have grown up, implying that I was still a child when we last met.' She sent him a mocking sideways glance. 'Have you developed a taste for children, Captain?'

Mark bit his lip hard enough to draw blood, thereby preventing himself from issuing the cutting retort that sprang to mind. If she had been a man, he would have struck her down for her insolence. But then again, if she had been a man, they would not have been conducting this conversation.

'You underestimate your charms, my dear, and your father's plans for you. He wanted to be sure that you would be secure after his death.'

'Nonsense!' She tossed her head. 'My father barely acknowledged my existence.'

'He was very proud of your achievements and often spoke of them. Ask any of the officers who served beneath him if you doubt my word. He intended to talk to you about his desire to see us united, and I am anxious to comply with the wishes of a man whom I respected enormously.'

'Ah, I see.' She sent him a withering look. 'And there was I attempting to persuade myself that I had got it all wrong and that you actually *are* in the throes of undying love.'

They strolled through a pretty orchard at the side of the house where there were any number of secluded spots in which Mark could launch his charm campaign, free from interruption and prying eyes. But he knew better than to try it. First, he needed to win her confidence; a task that was likely to be harder than he had at first envisaged. The kitten had most definitely developed claws. Mark could no longer pretend otherwise.

'Perhaps, at first, I was motivated by my desire to fulfil your father's wishes, but since meeting you here I have come to admire you enormously. Passionate love is the stuff of fiction, Clio, but be assured that if you will have me, I will be a devoted and attentive husband who will ensure that you want for nothing.'

'Thank you, Captain, but I want for nothing now so where is the advantage in surrendering my independence?'

'Foolish child! You will become an object of sympathy, an inconvenience to your relatives and an embarrassment to them if you do not marry. Old maids are always looked upon in such a manner.'

'Are they indeed? Even the wealthy ones who can afford to employ companions if they grow weary of their own company?' Mark inwardly fumed as she taunted him with suggestions about her wealth. 'Besides, I don't believe I mentioned an aversion to matrimony *per se*, Captain, but merely to marriage with you.'

'Ouch! I say.'

'If I was impolite then I make no apology.' She absently snatched at a blade of grass with the hand not holding her parasol. 'Had you not come here under false pretences, duping Lady Fletcher into believing that there was an understanding between us when no such thing existed, then I would have heard your proposal with politeness. Perhaps I would even have accepted it. Who can say? But I cannot abide underhandedness. I do not love you and anyway, I do not think that we would suit.'

'Clio, please, I beg you…' He grasped her upper arm but she sent his fingers an imperious look.

'Let go of me!' She didn't raise her voice but spoke with enough venom to ensure that he complied. Manhandling her wouldn't have the desired effect. He would have to think of something else. 'I have given you my answer, and shall not change my mind. If you are half the gentleman you claim to be, then you will accept my decision and graciously withdraw your attentions. There are plenty of ladies here who appear to enjoy your society, some of whom even have healthy dowries,' she added helpfully. 'I will be happy to introduce you to any who find favour.'

‘I am no pauper, if that is what you presume.’

‘And yet you made no mention of the comfortable life you could offer me if I were to accept you.’ She sent him a curious look. ‘Is that not the done thing, or did you suppose that I don’t care for creature comforts?’

Ye gods she was a tigress, and against all the odds, Mark found himself even more determined to have her. The little madam was serious in her mocking rejection, though! He could scarce believe it. He had never proposed before, it was true, but no female whom he had favoured with his attentions had ever rebuffed them. And yet this prime piece, barely out of the schoolroom, was looking down at him with haughty disdain, tinged with a modicum of ridicule.

It defied belief.

And it could not be left there. Mark had no intention of withdrawing, gracefully or otherwise. There had to be a way to change her mind and there were six more days of this party to go in order for him to find that way, as well as discharging his other duties. The real reason for his visit.

The sound of laughter and of mallets striking balls greeted them as they turned a corner and saw the croquet lawn in the far distance. A dog came bounding up to them, that scrawny creature of Wickham’s, and Clio bent to make a big fuss of it. Salford felt a moment’s panic, worried that Wickham might not be far behind, then berated himself for his fears. Mark had merely been walking with the lady, there was absolutely nothing untoward about his behaviour.

Not on this occasion.

‘I hope we can still be friends,’ he forced himself to say, bowing in front of Clio when they reached the terrace and then forcing himself to walk away.



Chapter Nine

The interlude with Captain Salford had shaken Clio badly, so instead of returning to the party she retreated to the orchard in search of solitude. Alone, she paced up and down, mulling the situation over. His simmering anger when she declined his presumptuous advances had been extreme.

And highly disturbing.

'There is nothing he can do to force my hand,' she said aloud, in an effort to convince herself that she was worrying unnecessarily. What was wrong with her? She had told Ezra that she would try and discover if Salford had come here with the intention of killing him. Instead, she was in danger of crumbling at the first hurdle because the man had scowled at her. 'Where's your backbone?' she demanded.

'Are you all right?'

She swung around, furious because Salford must have followed her. Her mistake registered when she was confronted by the duke's concerned expression.

'I thought you were playing games,' she said, more sharply than had been her intention. She absolutely didn't want him to see her looking so flustered. He would never permit her to help him with his enquiry if she appeared so feeble, but she very much wanted to make herself useful, perhaps because she wanted to prove something to herself. What that elusive something might be, she had yet to decide.

'The game you refer to is finished.' He smiled at her. 'I saw you with Salford.'

'And thought I needed rescuing?'

'It's clear that he has overset you. That much was obvious from the language I just overheard when you were talking to yourself.' He flashed another engaging smile. 'Eavesdropping becomes remarkably addictive, I find.'

Clio sighed. ‘I thought I was ready for him, but there is something threatening about him when he doesn’t get his way that is highly disconcerting. He is not a man who enjoys being crossed, but I don’t suppose I am telling you anything you were not already aware of. Anyway, I have made my position plain, rejected his proposal and asked him not to bother me again. I hope he will accept my decision.’

‘Let me have a word.’

‘Absolutely not!’ Clio bent to stroke Merlin’s head when he bounded up to them, his tail wagging. ‘How would that look?’

Ezra took her arm and led her behind a row of apple trees when a couple of other guests briefly stepped into the orchard. ‘I feel responsible.’

‘Why?’ She sent him a challenging look. ‘Do you imagine that Salford came here solely for the purpose of irritating you? Well, even if he is that foolish, his pursuit of me would hardly serve in that regard, and I cannot imagine why he would presume otherwise.’

He sent her a searching look. ‘Can you not?’

She looked away from him, confused. ‘What shall we do now?’

‘What a delightful question,’ he replied with a chuckle.

‘Behave yourself! I care about keeping you alive even if you seem to think of your survival as yet another game.’

‘Quite the reverse, I do assure you.’ Ezra paused, rubbing his chin as he stared off into the distance, probably not noticing the chaffinch that was sitting on a low bough, singing its heart out. ‘I think it a very real possibility that Salford has been commissioned to bump me off, given our difference of opinion over his ungentlemanly conduct as an officer. Particulars of the argument will have reached our assassin’s ears, if he has been keeping track of me. As you yourself have just discovered, Salford has a high opinion of himself and does not take kindly to having his conduct called into question. Add to that the fact that he is likely short of funds and I think our assassin has shown himself to be an astute judge of character.’

‘He has offered Salford the opportunity to achieve two objectives,’ Clio said. ‘If he is successful then he will enjoy a decent payday and exact the ultimate form of revenge upon you.’ She glanced up at Ezra. ‘Do you think he is really that arrogant, or that reckless?’

‘I do,’ Ezra replied, firming his jaw.

They strolled on in momentary silence. Clio became increasingly aware of the duke’s proximity as her skirts brushed against his legs. Surely he shouldn’t be walking so close that she could feel the heat from his body percolating through layers of petticoats and muslin?

There again, perhaps that heat was the result of a burning need that seemed to well up inside of her, quite without her permission, whenever he was anywhere near.

Dear God, she needed to keep a firmer grip on reality!

'Are you quite yourself?' Ezra asked with a whimsical smile that implied he knew precisely what he was doing to her. Clio wasn't about to fall for his unconventional methods and took a deliberate sidestep away from him. If he required adulation, he had only to return to his bevy of admirers on the croquet lawn. Clio was not so easily impressed by his admittedly glorious male splendour and would not pander to his vanity.

'Perfectly so, I thank you, your grace.'

'It's still Ezra,' he replied in a softly persuasive drawl. 'Now, what are we to do about Salford?'

'Find out what it is that he really wants from me, one supposes,' she replied with a casual shrug. 'It is not difficult to assume that my fortune is the attraction. But if that is the case and he was reasonably sure that he would meet with success—which he was since he is too arrogant to assume that any female could resist his questionable charms—it begs the question, why agree to murder you, a duke no less?' She glanced up at Ezra, frowning.

'Because I have offended him by calling his honour into question. He will know that rumours abound in that respect and that the majority will take my side.'

Clio waved the suggestion aside. 'He might bear you a grudge, but I have never supposed him to be stupid. He knows there would be the most thorough of investigations if something happens to you here, and that the public nature of your dispute will point the finger of suspicion firmly in his direction. Nor would the authorities require much proof of his guilt,' she added, warming to her theme. 'They will be under pressure to bring your murderer to justice, and Salford will do as well as anyone.'

'I am so very glad that you can remain so analytical in the face of my impending demise.'

'Oh, do be serious!' She swatted playfully at his arm. 'I am trying to keep you alive, you wretched ingrate.'

'For my part, I am trying very hard to take the matter seriously, I do assure you. If it appears otherwise then you are entirely to blame for my whimsy.'

'Me?' She pointed her index finger at her own chest for emphasis. 'What have I done?'

‘You distract me in the nicest possible way,’ he replied. ‘There is something about you, something rare in one so young that makes you stand out.’ His brow creased, implying that he was as bemused by his admission as Clio was to hear it.

‘Don’t be ridiculous! There is absolutely nothing out of the ordinary about me. Now stop being so disobliging. You are here to select a wife from the candidates who have presented themselves, not amuse yourself at my expense.’

Ezra smiled that slow, seductive smile of his that Clio reacted to despite her best efforts to ignore it.

‘I think,’ she said, feeling compelled to fill the charged silence between them, ‘that we should find a way to draw Salford out and make him admit to his true purpose, if only so that we can eliminate him as a possible assassin.’

‘Well, that’s obvious—his purpose, that is.’ Ezra scowled into the distance. ‘He is here to win your hand in marriage. You have made it clear to him that he will not succeed, but that will not prevent him from continuing to pursue you.’

‘That is his official reason. Lady Fletcher is a romantic, so she agreed immediately, just as he must have known that she would.’

Ezra raised a brow. ‘He is acquainted with her ladyship?’

‘In passing, but I suspect that whoever sent him here, if indeed anyone did, would have known that she would acquiesce, and that the romantic intentions he has made no effort to disguise would remove suspicion from him.’

‘I agree, my fierce little sleuth, but how we prove he has an alternative reason for being here eludes me.’

‘Nothing could be easier,’ Clio replied with asperity. ‘Must I do all the thinking?’ she added when Ezra sent her a mild look of enquiry. ‘You will need to set yourself up as a target, obviously.’

‘Ah.’ He chuckled. ‘I am not sure that idea appeals.’

‘You will be well-protected,’ she said impatiently. ‘Think about it logically. If Salford has been sent here to do away with you then he will not want to become a suspect, so he cannot risk committing the crime on this estate. That will reduce the field far too drastically. But there is nothing to prevent you from being set upon in the village when you go to—’

‘To join the other gentlemen in the local tavern.’ Clio could sense that he had taken her suggestion seriously and felt pleased to have thought of a possible remedy. ‘Your plan has merit, my lovely. It is not as though he could discharge a pistol,’ Ezra added in a considering

tone. ‘The sound of the shot would bring people running and he would have a hard time proving that he didn’t fire it. Especially if he did. The smell of the cordite would give him away, even if he found time to throw the weapon aside before help arrived.’

‘Precisely, so he will have to resort to a dagger or…well, something less immediately lethal.’

Ezra offered her a droll smile. ‘How reassuring.’

‘Surely you can defend yourself against the captain,’ Clio said, enjoying challenging him. ‘I will confess that he looks fit, strong and capable, but I suppose…’ She canted her head and sucked her lower lip between her teeth as she exacted revenge for unspecified grievances by pretending to contemplate his musculature. ‘However, I’m sure that you could hold your own. Besides, your man will be nearby to step in if needs be.’

‘Minx!’ He bent to throw a stick for Merlin, who barked and then scampered after it. ‘There isn’t enough time between now and tonight —’

‘Which could be just what Salford is depending upon.’

‘Well then, it will be interesting to see if he follows me, should I wander away from the main party.’

‘With help close at hand, naturally.’

‘Naturally.’ But Clio could sense that he had decided to take matters into his own hands.

‘What are you not telling me?’ she asked impatiently.

‘I am more interested in who’s pulling the killer’s strings, and why,’ he replied in a pensive tone. ‘That is the person we need to draw out.’

Clio conceded the point with a dip of her head. ‘In your situation, I would feel the exact same way. You assume that Salford doesn’t know?’

‘If he has been engaged, then I am absolutely sure of it. Whoever killed my father and brother went to extreme lengths to cover their tracks. He wouldn’t risk the person he’s hired knowing his identity, since if he is caught then he would give him up in a heartbeat in order to save his own skin. The mastermind would be aware of that.’

‘Very likely.’

‘Your grace, coo-ee! Are you there? You’re needed.’

‘That’s my aunt,’ Clio said anxiously. ‘Best that she does not find us here alone together.’

‘Ashamed of me?’ he asked in a mocking tone.

Clio shook her head at him and disappeared behind the nearest tree seconds before her aunt came into view.

‘Ah, your grace, exercising your dog, I see.’

‘I was enjoying a respite from your delightful entertainments, Lady Fletcher,’ he replied, turning on enough charm to make even Lady Fletcher blush, Clio noticed with amusement as she peeped round the side of her tree.

‘This is a lovely spot, I have to agree with you there, but if you are ready, we have need of you on the lawns. A new guest has just arrived who is most anxious to renew her acquaintanceship with you.’

‘Then by all means let us attend her.’ Ezra proffered his arm and Clio’s aunt placed her hand on it.

Clio watched them go, curious as to the identity of the new arrival. She gave them a few minutes’ head start and then returned to the lawns by a different route. She noticed Salford immediately, standing on the edge of the gathering and watching everything, as though ready to pounce whenever the time was right. He inclined his head and smiled when he noticed her, but she ignored the gesture and joined Adele, who was seated at a table pouring tea.

‘Who is that?’ Clio asked, nodding towards an attractive lady she had never seen before who was greeting Ezra with a familiar kiss on each cheek. Clio tamped down the jealousy she felt, noticing that Ezra didn’t seem especially pleased to see her. There was certainly none of the informal playfulness or wicked little smiles that he’d just shared with Clio, and he didn’t attempt to stand too close to the newcomer either.

‘Lady Isobel Walder.’

‘Never heard of her. Who is she? She seems to be acquainted with the duke.’

‘Mama knows her only slightly. She is recently widowed—’

‘Not so recently. She isn’t wearing widow’s weeds and doesn’t look especially heartbroken by the alteration to her circumstances.’

‘One assumes she is out of official mourning.’ Adele replaced the teapot on the table and handed a cup and saucer to Clio, who thanked her and took a sip of the scalding liquid. Adele poured another and handed it to a footman to pass on. ‘Anyway, Mama received a letter from her yesterday saying that she planned to be in the district for a few weeks and stating her intention to call.’

‘And let me guess, my aunt felt duty bound to invite her to the

party.'

'Yes, but she didn't think she would accept, which is why she didn't mention anything before now. She was never more surprised than when Lady Walder arrived a few moments ago.'

'She is creating quite a stir,' Clio remarked, watching Salford bowing over her hand and a small posse of other gentlemen awaiting an introduction.

'I believe her husband was an officer in the same regiment as your father, the duke and Captain Salford, which would explain how she became acquainted with them.'

'She followed the drum?'

Adele lifted one shoulder. 'Presumably so.'

'She is very striking, and appears fully aware of the fact.' Clio wrinkled her nose when the lady gave a tinkling little laugh that sounded entirely false and bestowed her full attention upon Lord Fryer, causing Adele's hand to tremble. 'I have not even spoken to her, but already have my suspicions about her intentions.'

'What sort of suspicions?'

'I wish I knew.' Clio fell to momentary contemplation. 'However, methinks the widow is here to lead the duke astray and to cause as much mayhem as possible. She certainly enjoys being the centre of attention.'

'As do most beautiful women, in my view.'

'True.' Clio grinned at Adele, wondering why she was feeling so out of charity with the new arrival when she had done Clio no harm. 'Anyway, I dare say the duke is perfectly capable of taking care of himself and doesn't need us to fight his battles for him.'

Well, not this particular battle.

'Beth will be even more dejected now.'

'She doesn't look exactly heartbroken,' Clio replied, glancing across the lawns to where Beth was giggling with two of the younger gentlemen at the archery butts when she failed to fire an arrow anywhere near the target. 'Perhaps she prefers the attentions of gentlemen closer to her own age.'

'And was setting her cap at the duke because Mama expected it of her?'

Clio lifted a shoulder, trying not to keep glancing at Ezra, who had wandered away from Lady Walder and was himself now strolling around the periphery of the gathering. 'Perhaps,' Clio said. 'Anyway, never mind Beth. What about you? Did you enjoy your game with

Lord Fryer?'

'Yes,' Adele replied, eyes downcast, 'but he appears to be enjoying the game he is playing at this moment a great deal more.'

Clio glanced at Lord Fryer as he smiled at Lady Walder and laughed at something she had just said to him.

'Well my love, cruel as it sounds, if he is really that inconstant then it is better that you discover the fact now. Personally, I think he is simply being polite. We have already speculated about his naturally companionable nature and the fact that he is affable and easy going with everyone he meets. Look, you see, he has already walked away from the lady and left her to others, as has the duke.'

Adele smiled. 'Don't mind me. I am really not *that* smitten with him.'

'Yes you are,' Clio replied, grinning.

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully, and Clio didn't exchange another private word with the duke or with Captain Salford. Lady Walder appeared to be at the centre of all the activity, flirting openly with every man who crossed her path and disregarding the ladies, none of whom she appeared to look upon as serious competition. Clio was disgusted by her behaviour and said as much to her aunt in a quiet aside.

'It is just her way, my dear. She means nothing by it,' Aunt Fletcher said, sounding as though she wished rather than believed that to be the case. 'She is not my favourite person, but I do know that she truly loved her husband and that he was taken from her at far too young an age. We must make allowances. Not everyone wears their grief openly and we all have different methods of overcoming it. Take it from one who knows,' she added, clearly thinking of her own husband. Aunt Fletcher had been courted by several eligible men since his demise but she wouldn't take any of them. No one, she had frequently assured Clio, could replace her beloved James.

'You make me ashamed of my uncharitable thoughts about the lady, Aunt.'

'You do not have an uncharitable bone in your body, my love, but you do observe too much and think too deeply. No good comes of a lady who is a deep thinker.'

With these words of wisdom ringing in her ears, Clio strolled away, smiling at her aunt's simple view of life. Clio herself would undoubtedly find her own life far less complicated if she could bring herself to adopt the same approach.

'We are in the manner that God made us,' she muttered, smiling at

the gentlemen who were still patiently attempting to teach Beth how to draw a bow and actually hit the target.

The afternoon's entertainments eventually came to an end and the gentlemen gravitated towards the stables, clearly intent upon quenching their thirsts at the local tavern. Ezra had not given Clio his assurance that he would be on his guard, and when she noticed his man Godfrey still on the estate after the gentlemen had quit it, she knew she had to do something to help him.

'He deserves to be murdered if he takes so little care of himself,' she muttered mutinously as she scurried back to her chamber. Without ringing for Daisy she changed into the lad's clothing that she sometimes wore in order to ride astride.

The male guests had gone into the village and the ladies were resting before changing for dinner, so Clio was able to slip from the house again unobserved. With a cap pulled low over her eyes, the head groom didn't bat an eyelid when he observed her garb.

'Off for a quick ride before dinner, I take it,' he said. 'I'll have Raven saddled in two seconds.'

Clio thanked him, slipped into the saddle the moment Raven was brought out and headed towards the village at a brisk trot. She had no particular plan in mind and could only hope that her disguise would hold up. She hadn't tested it out in the village before but was fairly sure that no one would take much notice of another lad wandering about the place at the end of his working day. Her only difficulty was Raven. No young lad would be seen riding a horse like him, and she couldn't risk leaving him at the mews behind the Royal Oak. He was known there and her disguise would be seen through in an instant.

'You will just have to remain here,' Clio told him, slipping from the saddle and tying his reins to a branch on the edge of the common land that adjoined the village. 'Kick anyone who tries to steal you. Hopefully, I shall not be long.'

Raven dropped his head and cropped at the grass, totally unperturbed. Clio, in contrast was suddenly full of nerves and uncertainty, aware that if she was caught then she would have some awkward explaining to do. Her aunt would be disappointed in her, and after everything that lady had done to make her feel welcome in her home, she would much prefer not to repay her by letting her down.

Even so, a pressing desire that she preferred not to examine too closely, an urgent need to protect the duke, made it impossible for her to remain passively at home attending to her embroidery. He was in danger, and he was too negligent of his own safety to realise it. In

these modern times it was ridiculous to imagine that a lady was any less capable of providing that protection than a strapping man. In fact sometimes—quite often in fact—being underestimated for reasons of gender worked to her advantage.

'It requires guile and ingenuity,' she said under her breath, fingering the paring knife in her pocket that she had borrowed from the fruit bowl in her aunt's hall.

The tavern, as she neared it, was busier than she had anticipated and she almost lost her nerve. It would be easy for a person to slip a dagger through the duke's ribs and saunter away undetected, she thought, her heart rate quickening at the prospect. The patrons had spilled out of the taproom into the street in front of it. There was much raucous laughter and bad language that Clio found…interesting.

As she slipped round the side of the building, where she would have a good view of proceedings and be in a position to spring to the duke's rescue should the need arise, she gave a little squeal. A man and woman appeared to be fighting.

Except they were not, Clio realised, as she stopped in the shadows and observed them with fascination. The man had his breeches down and the woman's skirts were hitched up around her waist. They were copulating and grunting like pigs. Clio found the sight disappointing. It seemed so clinical, especially when it was over in seconds and coin changed hands. The man fastened his breeches and strolled off, whistling. The girl—and she was little more than a girl, probably younger than her, Clio thought with dismay—adjusted her skirts, slipped the coins she had been given into her bodice and disappeared from view with her hips swaying. Neither of them appeared to notice Clio in her hiding place.

What now? she wondered. If the girl came back to what was obviously a favourite spot with another customer then Clio would likely be seen. She slipped round the back of the tavern, narrowly avoiding the contents of a chamber pot when they were thrown from an upper window, and took up a position on the opposite side of the building. She was slightly more exposed here, but still had an excellent view. She could see the duke in conversation with Lord Fryer. Salford was there too with his arm around the waist of the girl who had just dispensed with her previous customer.

'Well,' Clio muttered. 'If I regret my decision to reject him, which I do not, I am now absolutely sure that I did the right thing. The man is dissolute with obvious plans to rut in the street like a rampant pig.'

She was uncertain how long she remained there, watching the duke and thinking about Salford's loose morals. Gradually she became

aware of the fact that she was drawing the occasional glance from passers-by. It didn't seem as though anything was going to happen to the duke and Clio couldn't run the risk of being accosted. The moment she opened her mouth, any doubt about her gender would dissipate. Ezra hadn't allowed himself to be separated from Lord Fryer and Salford was otherwise occupied, having disappeared around the side of the tavern with the girl. Clio was glad of her decision to remove herself from her original location. She felt hot and cold all over when she considered the ramifications, had she been discovered lurking there—and by Salford of all people.

Deep in thought, Clio didn't hear the footsteps coming from behind in time to react. A large hand was clamped over her mouth and although she fought like the devil, she couldn't budge it. She could however reach her paring knife and would find an opportunity to use it before her identity was revealed. Of that she was fiercely determined.

'Stop fighting, damn it!'

The familiar voice immediately drained the fight out of Clio.

'You!' She spun round, knife raised, ready to deposit it in her assailant's eye. The duke easily removed it from her hand and slipped it into his pocket.

'Clio? What the devil…' He grabbed her arm and led her further into the shadows. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

'Trying to keep you safe.' Merlin had materialised and wagged his tail furiously at the sight of Clio. 'Someone has to look out for you.'

'Oh my sweet love!' His ferocious scowl gave way to a reluctant smile as he lowered his head and briefly covered her lips with his. 'No one has ever done anything half so selfless or foolhardy for my sake before. I am overwhelmed.'

'You almost lost an eye,' she replied, bemused by the kiss and… well, everything else she had seen and heard in the last hour. 'You should not creep up on people like that. How did you know I was here anyway?'

'You are not easy to overlook.'

'Nonsense! I blend in perfectly.'

'Godfrey saw you arrive and skulk about. When you didn't take yourself off, he thought I should know.'

'I didn't see him approach you.'

'That is supposed to be the point.'

'I thought he had remained on the estate,' she reluctantly

conceded, aware that she had royally underestimated Ezra's sense of self-preservation, and his meticulous planning too for that matter. 'That is why I thought I should come. I didn't think you had taken me seriously.'

'Godfrey is across the street. He sent me a signal.' Clio looked in that direction and noticed Ezra's man for the first time. He smiled at her but Clio didn't return the gesture. She felt foolish and unobservant. 'I took your warning very seriously. If you have been observing me, you will have noticed that I didn't allow myself to be separated. As for Salford, he's…'

'I know exactly what Captain Salford is doing, and with whom.' Clio shuddered.

'Well, there you are then. Come on, I'll escort you back. Where did you leave Raven?' He motioned to Godfrey, who disappeared and shortly returned with Pharaoh. Ezra led his stallion down the street and Clio walked beside him, not attracting any particular attention. 'Nice outfit,' Ezra remarked, treating her body to an exacting scrutiny.

'It has its uses. Anyone who looked at me simply assumed I was a lad hanging around the tavern in the hope of picking up an errand and earning a few pennies.'

Ezra turned a laugh into a cough and Clio blushed, aware of one way in which a female could earn a few pennies, having just seen more evidence of it with her own eyes than she had ever wanted to.

'Godfrey did not mistake you for a lad, and nor would anyone else who observed you at close quarters.' His gaze again raked down the length of her body, making her feel exposed, but not in an unpleasant way, which seemed contradictory.

'You are not taking this threat seriously,' she complained.

'On the contrary,' he assured her.

'And you are enjoying yourself a little too much. Men never really grow up, which is why they get involved with wars so frequently.'

'There is nothing enjoyable about warfare, my love. Take my word for it. Anyway, no one tried to kill me this afternoon, which I consider to be a bonus.'

'Who is Lady Walder?' Clio asked, trying to make the question sound casual. 'You appear to be well acquainted with her.'

'Jealous?' he asked, hitching a brow in a provocative manner that made her want to strike him.

'Don't be ridiculous! I am simply curious. I did not know she had been invited. In fact, I have never seen her before.'

‘She was married to an officer in our regiment, a man who died a hero’s death.’

‘Can death ever be heroic?’ she asked. ‘Dead is dead, no matter how it comes about.’

‘Some might say so.’

‘Most likely those who are attempting to encourage the enlisted men to take all the risks.’

Ezra laughed. ‘You have a very jaundiced view. However, to answer your question, I am slightly acquainted with Lady Walder, and I did not know she would he here either. I had no reason to. There, does that answer your question?’

‘Perfectly so.’

They had reached Raven’s position. Ezra placed his hands on Clio’s waist and lifted her into her saddle before swinging into his own.

‘Come on,’ he said, spurring Pharaoh forward. ‘I’ll race you home.’



Chapter Ten

If Ezra lived to be a hundred, he reflected as he dressed for dinner, he didn't think anyone would ever do anything half so impulsively reckless on his behalf as Clio had that afternoon. It defied explanation. Ordinarily, everyone who crossed his path required something from him, not the other way around. If the child craved adventure there were far less dangerous ways in which she could go about experiencing it. Did she harbour doubts about her father's wishes for her future and feel guilty for defying them by rejecting Salford? He had already surmised that Benton had largely ignored his only child, so it stood to reason that Clio would have wanted to impress him.

Ezra could have written a book on the subject of neglectful fathers and the lengths their children would go to in an effort to make an impression on them. Perhaps a small part of her actually believed that Benton had wanted his daughter to marry his adjutant. But Clio, young as she was, appeared already to know her own mind and trust her instincts. Those instincts told her that Salford was a wrong 'un, interested only in her fortune, which Ezra had heard was considerable, and she was going that extra mile to vindicate her decision. Protecting Ezra from any murderous intentions was not her primary motive.

'That possibility has put me firmly in my place,' he muttered with a wry smile.

'Have to hand it to the chit,' Godfrey remarked, apparently in tune with Ezra's way of thinking. 'She has pluck, misplaced or not.'

'She could have met a worse fate than she feared for me.' Ezra shook his head, which was filled with images of slim thighs and a pert backside encased in tight-fitting buckskin that he knew would haunt his dreams and cause him considerable discomfort for weeks to come. 'If any of those dissolutes had been capable of seeing straight, they would have taken the evidence of her gender as an invitation that she was there to satisfy their baser needs.' He clenched his fists. 'And the

devil of it is that we couldn't have done a thing to avenge her without drawing the fact that she was there to her aunt's attention, and dressed as a boy. Her reputation would never have recovered.'

'Children of either sex only hang around those places for one reason. No wonder she was drawing glances,' Godfrey agreed.

'I am glad you spotted her before any harm was done.'

'She's hard to miss.'

'You and I both know that,' Ezra replied, slipping his arms into his coat, 'but Clio is painfully unaware of the fact and still thinks that she was inconspicuous.'

'I don't doubt you'll point out the error of her ways to her,' Godfrey replied, chuckling. 'I should like to be a fly on that particular wall. Unless I miss my guess, the chit don't put much stock by your elevated status and will give as good as she gets.'

'I'll put her across my knee and spank some sense into her if she doesn't stop behaving so irresponsibly,' Ezra growled.

Godfrey grinned and refrained from commenting on that possibility. 'Salford didn't do anything out of the ordinary today,' he remarked instead.

Ezra grunted. 'Keep asking discreet questions about him, here and in the village. If he didn't bring a servant with him then one of Lady Fletcher's footmen must be waiting on him. See what he has to say about his habits. Go back to the village after supper and install yourself in the taproom. Keep your ears and eyes open. You know as well as I do that if he's been in there meeting anyone, someone will have seen him and be willing to speculate if you make it worth his while.'

'I get all the tough assignments,' Godfrey replied affably.

'Don't get pie-eyed and forget why you're there.'

'I will do my humble best.'

Ezra snorted at his man as he walked through the door that Godfrey opened for him. 'There's nothing humble about you,' he remarked.

Ezra was one of the last to go down, and he found the rest of the party assembled on the terrace. Clio was unrecognisable from the hoyden who'd tried to stick a paring knife through his eye less than two hours previously, and looked demure in pale pink silk, with a headdress of fresh flowers flowing through her coiffure. Her ensemble was simple and unfussy but her svelte body made her stand out amongst the more sophisticated styles that dominated the terrace. He

nodded in Clio's direction and she returned the gesture with a miniscule inclination of her head before returning to her conversation with her cousin.

Lady Walder drifted up to his side and he almost choked on the overpowering perfume that exuded from her body. She wore a red silk gown that left little to the imagination and did absolutely nothing to engage Ezra's interest.

'Your grace,' she said, slipping her arm through his. 'We were beginning to despair.'

'What on earth about?' he asked disinterestedly. He couldn't abide predatory females and there was an air of desperation about this particular one. At close quarters he could see that her face was heavily if artfully painted, but fine lines still showed around her mouth and eyes. She would hate to know that her age was showing almost as visibly as her desperation. He wondered how well situated Walder had left her. The man had been a gambler, often in debt to his fellow officers, and he sensed that Lady Walder would have been high maintenance.

'Why, you gentlemen of course. You all disappeared and left us ladies to our own devices. We were in danger of squabbling amongst ourselves for want of some better way to occupy our time.'

Ezra hoisted a brow in disdainful response, barely civil. 'You have something against the company of your own sex?'

'No, silly, of course not, but still…'

Her words trailed away and she looked rather foolish because Ezra hadn't responded to her light, flirtatious manner in like fashion. They reached Lady Fletcher's party and Ezra managed to abandon Lady Walder in the middle of a group of men who seemed perfectly willing to flatter her in the way that Ezra had not.

'We are to have impromptu dancing later,' Lady Fletcher told him before he could make good his escape. 'I hope you will take to the floor, your grace?'

'I shall certainly dance with you, Lady Fletcher, if you will have me.'

'Silly boy!' The lady flapped a hand. 'You should save your energy for the young things. My dancing days are behind me.'

'You will be forever young, ma'am,' he said, strolling away and joining Henry Fryer.

'Still alive then,' his friend remarked cheerfully.

'Glad to see that you're taking the matter seriously.' Ezra had

given Henry a brief outline of his concerns earlier that day, aware that his friend would keep his eyes and ears open on his behalf. ‘Although the Lady Walders of this world make me wonder if it’s worth the effort.’

Henry chuckled. ‘Making a nuisance of herself, is she? Well, what else can you expect, you being a rich, eligible and supposedly handsome duke? You’ve brought it all on yourself, so don’t expect any sympathy from this quarter.’

‘I have had it thrust upon me, Henry, as well you know.’ Ezra’s calm exterior showed a brief crack before he put his defences back into place.

‘Of course, old chap, my apologies.’ His friend acknowledged the fact with a rueful grin.

‘Did you notice anyone acting suspiciously at the tavern?’ Ezra continued, lowering his voice.

‘I didn’t see anything, but I did hear someone in the taproom remark upon Lady Walder’s lively disposition.’

Ezra sent his friend a concerned look. ‘In what respect? She would have no reason to visit the tavern. She would not have changed horses so close to her destination, so why else…’ Ezra took a moment to consider and scowled as a possibility occurred to him. ‘You don’t suppose she could be involved in this business to wipe my family out?’

‘Can you think of any reason why she would be?’

‘Money, of course. Isn’t that what motivates everyone?’ Ezra paused to consider. ‘She could be the assassin’s go-between, I suppose. No one would suspect a thing, but if she’s been sent here to tempt me into a liaison in order to get me alone and defenceless then she is destined to failure.’

‘You might consider going along with her plan,’ Henry remarked.

Ezra nodded. ‘Play into her hands and have people standing by when the assassin attacks, or fight him off myself.’ He again fell to contemplating. ‘Risky, but plausible. Lady Walder has sufficient faith in her own charm to assume she’d be able to pull it off.’

‘The prospect of a roll in the hay with an experienced widow would be sufficient to tempt most men.’

‘I am not most men.’

‘I know that, obviously, but Lady Walder has yet to make that discovery.’

Perhaps I will let her think that I’ll dance to her tune. Anything is better than all this waiting and speculation. I will give the matter

consideration.'

'Where did you rush off to earlier?' Henry asked. 'I really did think that you'd been got at, until someone said they'd seen you walk away from the tavern with a lad. That's probably the very last kind of rumour you'd want circulating. What was it all about?'

Ezra swore his friend to secrecy and then told him the truth. Henry roared with laughter. 'The chit has pluck, you have to admit. Damned risky thing for her to have done, though.'

'Precisely. She is very young but so intelligent and opinionated that it's easy to forget she knows nothing of the world.'

Henry sent Ezra a speculative look. 'You have taken a liking to her.'

It wasn't a question, and Ezra merely nodded. 'I find her intriguing, but the impulsive minx will get herself killed in her thirst for adventure if she does not have a care. How can I convince her that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself?'

'I would be more interested to know why you shared your concerns with her in the first place.'

Henry's customary smile dissipated when Ezra explained.

'I think the attraction has turned your brain to mulch,' he said in an undertone, conscious as Ezra was of the throng surrounding them who could easily overhear their conversation. 'You could have invented something, anything to explain the nature of the conversation she overheard that would have satisfied her curiosity—and yet you trusted her with the truth.' Henry shook his head. 'You know that women are incapable of keeping secrets, especially one of this magnitude. And the knowledge has driven her to impulsive acts that could have seen her attacked and despoiled in her desperation to impress you.'

'You think I am not aware of that?' Ezra snapped. 'Sorry,' he added, waving a placatory hand. 'It seems I don't like being told that I'm a dolt. It's a new experience. No one has ever dared to attempt it before. Well, no one whom I haven't knocked down for their impertinence.'

'It's not impertinent if it happens to be true, Ezra. You can depend upon me to keep you honest,' Henry replied, his good humour back in evidence. 'Now, what are you going to do about the delightful Miss Benton to keep her in line.'

Ezra rolled his eyes. 'What indeed? And in the meantime, you seem to be falling for her cousin.'

Henry gave a passionate sigh. 'Lady Adele is charm personified.'

‘Well then, it will be no hardship for you to stay close to her this evening. Ask her about her cousin in general terms and let me know if you think Miss Benton has confided in her regarding my own situation.’

Henry gave a mock bow. ‘Anything to oblige.’

‘In that case, keep Lady Walder away from me while you’re at it. I have decided against playing along with her. It’s too much to ask.’

‘Please do not ask me to juggle two women at once, Ezra. At least not in public. There are limits to our friendship, you know,’ Henry shook his head emphatically, sending a cascade of hair tumbling across his brow. ‘You’re on your own with that one. If I was forced to wager, I’d risk my all on her being here for one reason and one reason only; one that has nothing to do with assassins.’ He paused to fix Ezra with a significant glance. ‘And I’m looking at that reason right now.’

‘Perhaps, but I remain to be convinced. Lady Fletcher is barely acquainted with her, but she wrangled an invitation to this party only after she became aware that I would be in attendance. Besides, you said you overheard her name being mentioned in the Royal Oak’s taproom.’

Henry’s expression sobered. ‘Damn!’ he muttered. ‘What does that mean?’

‘I wish I knew.’

Their conversation was brought to an end when dinner was announced. Ezra desperately wanted to take Clio in but knew it would be a bad idea to draw attention to his interest in her. Lady Walder had somehow managed to gravitate towards him without his being aware and he was left with no choice but to offer her his arm. She looked victorious as she sailed into the dining room at his side. Ezra knew that she would not be quelled into silence by his presence in the manner that Beth had been the previous night, and steeled himself for two hours of fending off her flirtatious overtures.



Clio felt uncomfortable for reasons that she couldn’t fathom. Ezra had nodded at her when he walked onto the terrace, looking so suave and self-assured in his evening clothes that the sight of him took her breath away and brought home to her the futility of her fascination with him. She felt hot and cold all over when she thought about the spirited manner in which she had responded to him in their

exchanges, speaking to him like an equal.

Perhaps it had been rash of her to run off to the village in a ridiculous effort to protect him, she conceded, even if her intentions had been honest. She accepted a glass of peach ratafia from a footman's tray and smiled at a comment that Beth had just addressed to her. Dear Beth's conversation seldom required more than a tenth of Clio's attention and it was receiving even less than that at present.

'You seem preoccupied, Clio dearest,' Beth said, making Clio feel guilty for her wandering thoughts. 'Has someone overset you? Captain Salford keeps looking at you. He is very handsome and attentive. Mama says you are soon to be married but that you are keeping the captain waiting for your answer, which seems like a risky thing to do. If I had met my heart's desire then I would not play games.'

'My aunt mistakes the matter,' Clio replied absently. 'I have no amatory interest in the captain, but if I did then I would not toy with his affections. You may rest easy on that score.'

'In that case, if you have definitely decided against him, then you would be best advised to wait until next year when you are presented. You will then be at leisure to enjoy the attention and choose a husband from all the young gentlemen who show themselves on the marriage mart.'

'What a delightful prospect.' But Clio could see that her sarcasm was quite lost on Beth. 'Mr Adcock keeps looking at you,' she said. 'I noticed you spending time with him this afternoon on the archery range and I am sure that your conversation did not centre entirely on the target.'

'Well…' Beth giggled behind her fan.

'Now he is a pleasant gentleman. I haven't spoken with him very much, but I can see from the bloom that sprang to your cheeks at the mention of his name that you like him.'

'I cannot deny it,' Beth replied, fixing her gaze on the toes peeping out from beneath her hem, 'but Mama is set upon—'

'Upon your marrying the duke. Is that what you want, Beth?'

'Yes, of course…' She let out a long breath. 'Actually, no. He terrifies me and I have absolutely no idea what to say to him. Mr Adcock on the other hand…well, we talk and laugh and never run out of things to say to one another.'

'Mr Adcock is entirely respectable—and, I am told, heir to a rich estate. I am sure that my aunt desires your happiness above everything else, so I cannot see how she can object to your liking him.'

'I did try with the duke but…'

‘But he is a curmudgeon who didn’t take the trouble to put you at your ease.’

‘Oh no, Clio, he did try but I was not a very lively companion, I’m afraid. I was too aware of Mama’s instruction to be myself. You are younger than me but so much more confident. You would not have been similarly afflicted, I am absolutely sure of it.’

‘That situation is never likely to arise,’ Clio said briskly, telling herself that she had not tried to talk Beth out of pursuing the duke because she had ambitions of her own in that regard. She absolutely did not, and even if she did she would be the first to acknowledge their futility. It was simply a case of steering Beth’s thoughts away from a *mésalliance* of epic proportions and more particularly convincing her cousin that she should put her own heart ahead of her mother’s plans for her. ‘Anyway, it looks as though dinner is about to be announced and your Mr Adcock, unless I mistake the matter, is about to offer you his arm. Accept it, my dear, and enjoy yourself.’

‘You know, Clio, I believe I shall.’

Clio smiled at Beth as she watched her walk away with Mr Adcock. Already they appeared to have a great deal to say to one another. She noticed Adele with Lord Fryer and belatedly realised that she had no escort of her own.

And Captain Salford was hovering like the predatory spider she had started to think of him as.

‘Damn!’ she muttered, adding a few of the choice words she had learned that afternoon while lingering outside the Royal Oak for good measure. She ought to have anticipated that a soldier would plot his strategy and outmanoeuvre her.

‘Clio,’ Salford said, bowing in front of her. ‘It seems that you and I are destined to dine together.’

She wanted to tell him that she would happily go in alone but could see Lady Fletcher watching them and would not for the world be openly impolite to one of her guests. So she placed her hand on the captain’s sleeve with as much good grace as she could muster, which was not a great deal, thinking that at least Adele and Beth would enjoy themselves. She glanced at the duke with Lady Walder on his arm, wondering if his choice was significant. He had told Clio that he had no interest in the lady, but if that was the case, why had he chosen to give quite the contrary impression by taking her in?

‘I understand your reticence,’ the captain said, having helped Clio with her chair and then settled in his own once the last of the ladies was seated, ‘and accept your disinclination for matrimony.’ He

allowed a significant pause. ‘At least for now. I cannot guarantee that I will not renew my suit when you have had an opportunity to know me better. I can quite see that I rushed you. I misinterpreted your nature and your spirit…Anyway, my point is, we have to speak of something for the next few hours. It will look very odd if we do not.’

‘Appearances bother you?’ Clio asked, leaning away from him as a footman filled her glass. She thanked him, picked it up and took a small sip of crisp wine.

‘We are all slaves to social mores.’

‘Are we?’ Clio lifted one shoulder. ‘Personally, I dislike being predictable.’

‘You are very much like your father in that respect. He liked to play devil’s advocate when preparing battle strategy.’

‘The comparison is particularly apt, I think.’ Clio picked up her spoon and savoured a taste of her mock turtle soup. Her aunt’s French chef had, as always, excelled himself. ‘The social rigmarole could well be likened to preparation for battle, what with all the jockeying for the best position, which is not always on the moral high ground.’

‘You do not hold a high opinion of society?’

‘I have seen little of it, but when I come out next year I am sure that I shall be exposed to all its various delights.’

If Clio’s reference to her impending presentation reminded the captain of the futility of his pursuit, as was her intention, he gave no sign. Instead, he smiled and turned to his soup. ‘We shall see,’ he said ambiguously.

‘You shall not see, Captain,’ Clio replied, thinking it important that there be no ambiguity between them. ‘As far as I am aware, it is not you who will be making your curtsey to the queen.’

He looked a little discomposed by her acerbic tone but covered his reaction with another smile. ‘Now there’s a thought.’

Clio was grateful that Beth and Mr Adcock were seated beside her. Mr Adcock ensured that he gave her a good deal of his attention, as was his responsibility, forcing the captain to do likewise with the lady on his opposite side. Clio was thus spared the discomfort of the captain’s scrutiny for much of the meal. That in turn permitted her to send frequent glances Ezra’s way. Lady Walder was holding court, making all the men in her vicinity laugh at her anecdotes. Clio could see that Ezra’s smile was perfunctory and that he was having no better time of it than she herself was. He caught her watching him on one occasion and winked at her, causing Clio’s cheeks to warm.

‘I understand that Lady Walder’s late husband was an officer in

Papa's regiment,' Clio said when the captain returned his attention to her.

'He was, and a finer man never drew breath. His death was a tragedy.'

'All deaths are tragedies.'

'True, but Walder knew no fear and never asked anything of the men beneath his command that he himself was not prepared to tackle.'

Clio sent him an arch look. 'Is that not the case with all officers?'

Salford offered her a condescending smile and shook his head. 'You have never been in the theatre of war, Clio, so you cannot possibly know what you are saying. You should not make the error of judging everyone by your father's standards.'

Furious to be spoken down to, Clio turned towards him with the sweetest of smiles. 'Are you suggesting that we breed cowards as officers, Captain? Is that your first-hand experience of the theatre you refer to and if so, do you include yourself and the duke in that category?'

Anger flashed through his eyes. 'Wickham served with distinction and was mentioned in despatches many times,' he said grudgingly.

'And you were not?'

'I had different responsibilities.'

'Ah, I see. That would probably explain it.'

'You cannot possibly understand the complexities of war, and no more should you,' he said stiffly.

'Naturally I cannot, as I am but a feeble female.'

Clio turned away from him, glad that Mr Adcock had chosen that moment to address a question to her. She was unsure how much longer she could have withstood Salford's condescending manner before retaliating. She had not, she realised, made any headway in discovering whether or not he was here with the intention of killing the duke. It was clear that he disliked and resented him but that was a far cry from killing such a man—or indeed any man—for profit and revenge.

A fine sleuth she would make, she thought with a wry smile.

When the meal finally came to an end, Clio was one of the first ladies to spring to her feet. She offered the captain perfunctory thanks for his company and left the dining room close on her aunt's heels.

'I hope the captain grows upon you with better acquaintance, my

dear,' her aunt remarked. 'He is an upstanding gentleman, charming and popular, and a favourite of your father's no less. You could do a lot worse.'

Clio made some non-committal response and wandered to the side of the room, where Adele had saved her a chair. The duchess happened to be seated close to them but sent them both a dismissive look and didn't attempt to make conversation. Lady Walder approached her, clearly with that intention in mind, but the duchess rudely turned away and pretended not to notice her.

'At least she shares my view of Lady Walder,' Clio said in an undertone to Adele.

'She clearly does not approve of the manner in which Lady Walder dominated the dining room conversation,' Adele replied. 'I have not seen her take much notice of her only remaining son since her arrival. She seems totally taken up by the assiduous attentions of Mr Conway. He would drive me demented with his fussing. However, I dare say she is mindful of the matter of succession. Lady Walder is no longer in the first flush of youth and, I understand, did not give her husband any children.'

'Which may not be her fault, although equally it could well be,' Clio replied, nodding her understanding. 'I don't think her grace has any cause for concern however. I watched the duke and Lady Walder during the course of dinner and the only person at that end of the table who did not appear animated was the duke himself.'

'He doesn't seem to like anyone very much. Certainly not Beth.'

'He would make Beth miserable. The duke needs a wife who will challenge him.' Clio smiled and squeezed Adele's hand. 'However, that is none of our concern. Tell me instead about Lord Fryer. He took you in for the second evening in a row. That honour is difficult to misinterpret. Clearly he has the good sense to be interested in you.'

'Well…' Adele blushed. 'I suppose his attentions are very apparent, but I am not getting my hopes up. He has asked me to save him a dance.'

'Excellent! I shall not even complain when you leave me to be presented alone.'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

The sound of musicians tuning their instruments in the gallery above diverted their attention. The doors to an adjoining room had been thrown open during the course of dinner and the furniture moved back to make space for the dancing. The sound of male voices and their footsteps echoing off the boarded floor gave notice of the

gentlemen's impending arrival, at which point Clio knew she had lost Adele's attention.

Keen not to be cornered by the captain again, she stood up and slipped out onto the terrace. It was almost full dark but Clio could still see fairly well, and was familiar with the topography of her aunt's grounds. She narrowed her gaze when she noticed a flash of red disappearing behind the stables in the direction of the orchard where she and the duke had enjoyed an earlier conversation, closely followed by a man with a military bearing and purposeful stride.

'The captain and Lady Walder,' she muttered, bemused. 'Where the devil are they going?'

Without thinking about the wisdom of her actions she slipped onto the lawns and followed them.



Chapter Eleven

Mark Salford was required to swallow down bile. He curtailed his anger by focusing his mind on the allures of his mistress in order to endure Clio's scathing looks and pithy retorts during the course of an interminable meal. Damn it, the chit would pay dearly for her impertinence once she had his ring on her finger. She could not possibly be serious in her rejection of him. No female had ever held out indefinitely when he launched a charm campaign. His appeal to the opposite sex was both a blessing and a curse. They were so damned predictable that the game had lost its appeal. But he still enjoyed the thrill of the chase and Clio had restored his appetite for it, as well as infuriating him, since it was clear that she intended to make him grovel.

So be it.

Battle lines had been drawn, and when it came to conflict there was no better strategist than Mark. He had already won Lady Fletcher over by hinting at a lasting attachment to Clio and the silly woman would now do everything in her power to throw him and her niece together. It shouldn't have been necessary to depend upon her support but Mark had very compelling reasons to stoop to underhand tactics, his pride be damned.

When the gentlemen had finished with the port, Mark left the dining room directly through the open French doors and made his way briskly towards the orchard beyond the stables. He had an engagement to keep with a lady who did not smile upon tardiness. None of the gentlemen appeared to notice that he had not followed them into the makeshift ballroom. He would join them again before he was missed.

'My love.' He pulled Isobel Walder into his arms the moment he reached the agreed spot and found her waiting for him beneath an apple tree. 'I thought I would never get away.'

He kissed her, enjoying her enthusiastic response and the feel of her supple body pressed against his as his hands roamed over her voluptuous curves. She tasted of wine, strawberries and wild expectations, an intoxicating combination that fired Mark's lust and increased his determination to overcome Clio's feeble objections to his proposal. Everything hinged upon her acceptance of it.

'How is the strumpet?' she asked when Mark finally released her.

Mark was shocked to find that he disliked hearing Clio described in such derogatory terms. She was an impertinent baggage who deserved a good thrashing for being such a tease, but he hadn't started to develop feelings for her, had he? He dismissed the possibility with an impatient shake of his head. Virginal misses made poor substitutes for the voluptuous, hedonistic, unrestrained female in his arms.

A very small part of Mark's conscience balked at his determination to win Clio's hand simply to gain control of her considerable fortune. That realisation surprised him mainly because his conscience, such as it was, rarely troubled him nowadays. Men married for money all the time, he reminded himself, and Clio would be besieged by fortune hunters when she came out next year. Mark owed it to his commanding officer, a man whom he had actually respected, to save his daughter from that ignominy.

That respect had waned, he conceded, when Benton privately told Mark that he accepted Wickham's version of events regarding his dalliance with the Spanish tease. He made it clear that he hadn't had Mark cashiered only because he was thinking of the regiment's reputation.

Benton became very aloof after that. He no longer treated Mark as a confidant and friend, and things hadn't been comfortable between them. Perdition, the victor enjoyed the spoils of war—it was his right and an unwritten law. Besides, the hussy had been willing enough, until her father discovered what she'd done, then she had tried to put the blame on Mark. The recollection still rankled. Mark had never had to force any woman into his bed, certainly not a Spanish filly with over-developed notions of her own importance.

The possibility of courting Clio sprang to mind only after Mark lost his commanding officer's respect. It seemed like poetic justice. The chit needed someone to protect her interests. Why not him? They were acquainted and Clio had always seemed to like him. Well of course she had! So he would do Benton a service and look out for his precious daughter. His intentions at that point had been more or less honourable, and he felt pleased with his decision to give up soldiering and make the not unattractive child a devoted and attentive husband.

Then he met Isobel and everything changed in a heartbeat. He fell head over heels in love for the first time in his life with her wild, untamed beauty and her even wilder behaviour. They were kindred spirits in all respects. He wanted her exclusive company but recognised a shadow of his own character in her conduct and accepted that one could never tie a free spirit down. Besides, marriage was out of the question. England was no longer at war and he could hardly ask a lady of her refined tastes to live on a serving officer's half pay. Suddenly, pursuing Clio was no longer an idle means of exacting revenge upon her father but a matter of extreme urgency.

'Thawing,' Mark replied succinctly, firmly believing…well, hoping that she would. Eventually. He was not about to admit to the woman he adored that he was continuing to encounter a brick wall, or that he would enjoy consummating their relationship, by force if necessary. Other men, better situated than he was, were sniffing around Isobel's petticoats and he wasn't about to lose her for the lack of a means of support. 'What of the duke?'

Mark held his breath while he waited for her to answer. He had been horrified when he first realised that she intended to come to this party, not so that she and Mark could continue with their affair, but in order to pursue Wickham. Of all the men to lose her to…But she hadn't been here long before he observed how little interest the duke actually took in her.

'He is biding his time,' she replied, looking away from Mark and sucking in a sharp breath. 'It's all a ploy, of course, and he enjoys keeping me guessing. He cannot possibly be serious in his disinterest.'

'He would be a damned fool to overlook you.'

Mark breathed more easily, aware that it was not a ploy. Wickham was known to be inordinately selective when it came to feminine company, as though the majority of the ladies who batted their lashes at him were beneath the ducal notice. Mark thought it very unlikely that he would settle his interest on another man's widow, especially one who did not enjoy a spotless reputation, but he said none of those things. Let her harbour her dreams. He would be there to console her when they failed to come to fruition.

They had entered inevitably into what she assumed was a harmless affair, thinking Mark to be on the point of winning Clio's hand. He couldn't trust her to know that it was all a strategy—a means to an end so that he could metamorphose into the gentleman of means he had been put on this earth to become—free of all encumbrances other than those of his own choosing.

'He does not deserve you, or appreciate you.'

Isobel lifted one shoulder. ‘We shall see.’

Mark pulled her back into his arms and kissed her for a second time, only more thoroughly. ‘Do we have time?’ he asked when he broke the kiss, aroused almost to the point of no return, nodding in the direction of the hay barn.

‘Best not. Come to my room tonight.’

‘Try and keep me away. I yearn for you, my love.’

‘What was that?’ she asked, cocking her head to one side and jumping out of his arms. ‘Did you hear something?’



Lady Walden’s cloying perfume lingered in the dining parlour and on Ezra’s person long after she had quit the room with the rest of the ladies. He took little part in the gentlemen’s conversation as the port circulated, his mind full of his problems and Clio’s determination to insinuate herself in the midst of them. Her reason for being so insistent was less clear to him, but if pressed she would doubtless claim that Salford’s pursuit of her gave her a legitimate reason to expose his ill intentions.

Which was all well and good, but it was dangerous and she must somehow be made to see that fact. Ezra admired her spirited and selfless determination. He couldn’t recall the last occasion upon which a member of either sex had done him a service with no expectation of reward. But it wouldn’t serve. If Ezra was right and an anonymous someone was ruthlessly wiping out his family one male at a time, he wouldn’t think twice of cutting down any female who got in his way.

Determined to extract a promise from Clio not to involve herself in his affairs, Ezra left the dining room with the rest of the gentlemen when the port stopped circulating. He stepped out onto the terrace when the dancing began, in no mood to stand up with anyone until he had thrashed matters out with Clio, and perhaps not even then. A swift glance around the room had failed to identify her amongst those eagerly taking to the floor and Ezra suspected that he might find her out here, avoiding Salford.

But there was no sign of her.

Or of Salford, which was infinitely more worrying. If he had followed her outside and forced himself upon her in a brutish attempt to pressure her into matrimony then Ezra would not be responsible for

his actions. The foolish child should have remained inside, where she would have been safe. Somehow Ezra was unsurprised to discover that she had not. The strength of his determination to protect the chit shocked him rigid. He was here with the sole purpose of discovering who wanted him dead, not to look out for a child who meant nothing to him.

Well, almost nothing.

'Where the devil…'

He glanced in the direction of the stables for some reason, unsure what had drawn his attention. The music coming from the house made it impossible for him to hear anything other than the sound of a fiddle being played not especially well and that of feet dancing an energetic jig on a boarded floor.

He stepped onto the lawn and headed towards the stables, trusting his instincts. As the sound of the music and laughter faded and his senses became more attuned, he thought he caught a snippet of conversation. It was a lady's voice but not Clio's. It took Ezra a moment to realise that he had been listening to that same voice—light and flirtatious, tinged with an edge of desperation when he didn't respond in the way she expected of him—for the past two hours.

'Lady Walder,' he breathed. 'But where the devil is Clio?'

Keeping to the shadows, even though there was little chance of his being seen since it was full dark, he reached the edge of the orchard immediately behind the stables. There was a lantern in the stable yard that cast a corridor of light across a narrow section of the orchard. Ezra caught sight of a patch of pink and groaned inwardly. Clio was wearing pink, had obviously followed Lady Walder and was listening to her conversation. The irresponsible miss was determined to get into mischief, it seemed, and had taken it upon herself to eavesdrop on Lady Walder's assignation.

Sighing, Ezra crept up behind her on silent feet and, for the second time recently, placed a hand over her mouth.

'This is getting to be a habit,' he muttered.

Her body had tensed but relaxed again, presumably because she recognised his voice. She sagged against him.

'Just in time,' she whispered. 'You will find this interesting.'

'You shouldn't be here,' he told her in a stern undertone at the same time. 'What if they had caught you? This is nothing to do with you.'

'It is everything to do with me,' she hissed furiously. 'The man who claims to adore me is currently…' Ezra's anger abated because he

was absolutely sure from her embarrassed tone that she had to be blushing. ‘Well, he is currently making up to Lady Walder, who wants to entice you into matrimony and is confident that she will succeed.’

Ezra grunted.

‘And Captain Salford is equally confident of winning my heart,’ she added, sniffing disdainfully. ‘Such arrogance!’

Ezra slid an arm around her slim waist, watching as Salford kissed Isobel Walder and ran his hands over her body. He was unsure if it was a suitable spectacle for Clio to observe but knew that short of throwing her over his shoulder and forcibly removing her, she would insist upon staying. Arguing the point would likely alert Salford to their presence. Ezra could but hope that Salford would call a halt before matters progressed beyond recall.

He did so eventually and sent Lady Walder back to the house, waiting for a moment or two before he followed in that direction.

‘Phew!’ Clio glanced up at Ezra. ‘At least now we know why he is so keen to marry me, if there was ever any doubt. The odious man needs my fortune in order to keep his mistress in style.’

Another possibility had occurred to Ezra but he chose not to point out that once Salford had his hands on her fortune, Clio would be surplus to requirements. He hadn’t needed to see any more to accept that Salford was violently in love with Lady Walder. He could hear passion in his tone that was not entirely the produce of lust. That ought not to have surprised him. Salford and Lady Walder were both unscrupulous in their pursuit of hedonistic pleasure—ideal bedfellows in all respects. But pleasure came at a high cost. Salford liked to be in control and it would be impossible for him to control Lady Walder if they were not man and wife—and perhaps not even then. Besides, he would not want to share her favours, even if he considered it his right to continue bestowing his own wherever the fancy took him.

Ezra despised men of his ilk.

There could be no doubt; Salford needed Clio’s wealth, and he needed it as a matter of urgency.

‘He cannot have you or your fortune, and there’s an end to it,’ Ezra said with authority. ‘We are now aware of his purpose and can remain one step ahead of him.’

‘Thank you for concerning yourself with my affairs, but shouldn’t you be putting your own wellbeing first?’ Ezra shook his head, thinking that she was saying what he had come out here to tell her. Instead, she had distracted him as she so easily could, without even appearing to try. ‘They didn’t mention anything about killing you, in

case you are wondering. I want it to be them, but I don't think either of them is involved.'

Ezra wasn't ready to dismiss the possibility without definite proof. 'That's reassuring,' he contented himself with saying.

'It must be your fastidious cousin,' she said.

'I have sent Godfrey to the tavern. Perhaps he will learn something to our advantage in the taproom. I am still curious to know why Lady Walder's name was mentioned there earlier today. She had no reason to stop there and I dislike unexplained coincidences.'

'It is all so very disagreeable,' Clio said, folding her arms across her waist and shaking her head. 'This unseemly ruse to get his grubby hands on my fortune, I mean. I realise that everyone must have something to live on but even so, is this what I have to look forward to next season? If so I might forego presentation in favour of a life of seclusion in the country breeding…ferrets.'

'Ferrets?' Ezra quirked a brow, endlessly amused by her lively imagination.

'Certainly. They are extremely useful creatures and much maligned. I kept one in my bedroom when I was a child and he hardly smelled at all.'

'I am sorry you have been exposed to Salford's tawdry machinations,' Ezra said, pulling her into the protective circle of his arms. She made no objection to the impulsive gesture and rested the side of her face against his shoulder. 'Don't allow it to overset you. I will not permit Salford to trouble you, and I assure you that not all gentlemen are as unscrupulous as him. Don't allow that possibility to spoil your season. You are intelligent enough to recognise the fortune hunters.'

Her head shot up again. 'Thank you, but I can take care of myself. If you take up the cudgels on my behalf then it will create more problems than it will solve.'

'Let me look out for your interests,' he said in a soft, persuasive drawl that he addressed to the top of her flower-adorned head. 'If only because I respected your father enormously. He would not like to think of you being troubled by a rogue like Salford. Besides, you really must take more care. Wandering out here alone with Salford at large…'

'There is nothing he can do to me,' she said confidently.

'On the contrary, if he compromises you—and I wouldn't put it past him based on the way he conducted himself in Spain—then you will be ruined and will have to marry him.'

‘Ha! That is where you are quite wrong. The more someone attempts to manipulate me, the harder I fight back. He will not overpower me. I know how to defend myself.’

‘Really?’ Ezra shook his head. ‘Against a man at least twice as strong as you?’

‘Certainly. All men have weak spots.’

Ezra shuddered and knew he should let the subject drop, at least for now. But she should not be wandering about alone, taking risks. On that score he was fiercely determined. ‘Remind me never to get on your wrong side,’ he said.

He felt her tremble as her own arms left her sides and wound their way around his neck. Only then did the perilous nature of their encounter dawn on Ezra. He really should have kept himself in check. This was wrong on so many levels, and yet having her in his arms felt like the most natural thing in the world. Why did he not make an excuse, conduct her back to the house in a gentlemanly manner and then steer well clear of her in future, leaving his servants to watch over her and ensure that Salford didn’t make unwanted advances?

Because his thoughts at that moment were anything other than gentlemanly, he knew. The feel of her supple body pressed against his was playing havoc with his self-control and if he didn’t release her now, immediately, whilst he still retained a modicum of sense then he would very likely ravish her there and then in Lady Fletcher’s orchard. Which would make him little better than Salford.

With a sigh of regret he gently disentangled her arms and released her. ‘We ought to return to the party before we are missed,’ he said, tweaking the end of her nose.

She sent him a look of mild rebuke. ‘Naturally we ought…’ She abruptly stopped talking and cocked her head to one side. ‘Someone is in the stables,’ she whispered urgently. ‘I can hear a lady speaking.’

Ezra listened too, grateful for the distraction from an enticing situation that he had never been completely in control of, and identified his mother’s voice asking her driver to harness her curricle and to be quick about it. Since when had the mater issued those sorts of instructions herself? he wondered. Ordinarily, she would send a servant to carry out such a menial task and wait in the house for the conveyance to be brought round. Where was she going in such secrecy?

They watched in silence until the vehicle was driven away at a brisk trot with the veiled duchess seated inside of it.

She was alone.

‘Where can she be going?’ Clio asked.

Ezra firmed his jaw, his amatory interest in Clio replaced by graver concerns. ‘Most likely to visit Lord Brennan.’

‘Does he live in the district?’

‘No, but there is nothing to prevent him from taking lodgings close by.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Clio said, frowning as they turned together towards the house. ‘Presumably she is free to see him at any time of her choosing. She is, after all, a widow.’

‘A widow living beneath my roof, almost completely dependent upon my largesse.’

Clio looked up at him. ‘She imagines you would disapprove?’

‘Brennan is more than a decade younger than my mother and has already buried two wives. He is also a notorious gambler and is always short of funds. I will not have the man in my house and voiced my disapproval of his lifestyle in my mother’s hearing, even though she has never admitted to the affair and I have never asked her about it. I wish her joy but at the same time I don’t want to see her exploited.’

‘You think a lady of your mother’s comparatively advanced years will not recognise him for what he is? For what the attraction to her must be?’

Ezra smiled as he considered his mother’s likely reaction to an accusation of being of advanced years. ‘She has limited funds of her own, and it will not have occurred to her that he is desperate enough to kill us off one by one in order to get his hands on the greater prize.’

‘Ah, I see.’ Clio nodded emphatically and the flowers arranged in her hair slipped to one side. Ezra lifted a hand and gently pushed them back into place. ‘Well then, Brennan is obviously the most probable assassin. Given what you have just told me, I am surprised you suspected anyone else. But now, the question remains, what shall we do about it?’

‘Nothing.’ Ezra nodded to a lone horseman who had just left the stables. ‘Leave it to me, Clio. I will not have you putting yourself in danger. Besides, since Brennan has not been invited to this party, there is nothing you can do.’

‘Foolish man! We have already agreed that he doesn’t carry out the murders himself. He will have someone here to do it for him and I will notice anyone watching you. A servant, perhaps, or even a fellow guest. No one will suspect me, but the guilty party will be watching you like a hawk. Perhaps even now.’ She instinctively glanced over

her shoulder. ‘Who was that, leaving the stables on horseback? You have someone following her?’

‘I put someone to watch the stables, expecting an uninvited guest. I did not anticipate that my mother’s passions would drive her away at such an hour,’ Ezra replied in a grim tone. ‘But at least we shall soon know where she has gone and if we have correctly guessed whom she meets with.’

‘Could you not just confide in her?’

Ezra took his turn to emphatically shake his head. ‘We do not have the type of relationship that invites confidence. Without definitive proof, my mother will simply say that I am imagining things. I wish she was right, but I doubt it. Besides, her affections are engaged and she would probably run to Brennan and tell him of my suspicions.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, slipping her hand into his. Ezra gave it a reassuring squeeze and did not release it again until they reached the terrace.

‘We should go in separately,’ she said. ‘People will notice.’

‘People can go hang themselves!’ Ezra replied impatiently, tired suddenly of keeping up appearances.

The opening stanza of a waltz struck up. Without giving her the opportunity to object, he pulled her into his arms, swung her through the doors and into the ballroom. She gasped but then laughed as her feet followed his, as light as air. Her floral halo had slipped again, a fitting tribute to her unorthodox character, and this time Ezra didn’t bother to set it straight.

‘Everyone is staring at us,’ she chided. ‘They think you have taken leave of your senses, which of course you have, as well as offending just about every other young lady in the room.’

‘I enjoy giving offence. It is one of the few pleasures I take from this wretched dukedom.’

‘And you know you are safe with me, I suppose,’ she added, ‘and that I will not read anything unrealistic into a simple dance. After all, I am not fit for a duke.’

Ezra smiled at her simple logic as he swung her into a turn, conscious of his cousin Silas watching them with a scowl on his face.



Chapter Twelve

Clio felt dizzy for reasons that had nothing to do with the manner in which Ezra whirled her around the floor, holding her firmly in his strong arms as the rest of the gathering looked on with varying degrees of astonishment. Lady Walder, she couldn't help noticing, struggled to hide her disdain. Ezra hadn't danced all evening, and had finally chosen to take to the floor as a waltz, the opportunity for a gentleman to hold a lady closer than was respectable, struck up. Ezra *was* holding Clio too close, much too close, and quite deliberately so, she was absolutely sure of it. Why he felt the need to make such a public declaration she had yet to decide. Be that as it may, barely an inch separated their bodies and her skirts constantly tangled with his legs as a consequence.

'You do realise that we are the only couple dancing,' she said, following where his feet led. 'And that Lady Walder assumed it would be she whom you would invite to waltz.'

Ezra grunted. 'Lady Walder is a fantasist.'

'Perhaps, but she would enjoy showing off whereas I dislike being the centre of attention—or fodder for the gossips, for that matter.'

'You make a delightful centre of attention.'

'Don't be ridiculous! But I have never waltzed in public before.'

'Where did you learn?'

'In my aunt's drawing room. Adele was my partner but I am taller, so I had to take the man's part. Don't be surprised if I try to take the lead.'

Ezra laughed. 'Nothing you do would ever surprise me.'

'Now Captain Salford is glaring too. I hope he doesn't attempt to cut in.'

Ezra's expression hardened. 'He is welcome to try.' The grip of

winter left his eyes as quickly as it had arrived. ‘Let’s give him something to glare about.’ His arm tightened across her back and he pulled her even closer.

‘Don’t you dare!’ she cried, laughing.

‘I did not take you for a coward.’

‘If it was only myself I had to consider, I would gladly join in your capers, but I would not for the world disappoint my aunt, or give rise to baseless speculation. My aunt has been so very kind to me, and you know very well that you only have to smile at a lady for the speculation I would prefer to avoid to abound. I am well aware that you are being whimsical, playing them at their own game, if you like, but they don’t know that and probably think you have taken complete leave of your senses.’

‘In which case, it is they who lack wisdom.’

His eyes gleamed with an unfathomable emotion as their gazes clashed and held. The manner in which his expression softened as he issued some sort of unspoken challenge brought with it an air of expectancy that heightened her perceptions and produced an involuntary rush of desire that pooled deliciously in the pit of her stomach. She felt as light as a summer breeze in his arms, capable at that moment of conquering the world. Ezra Delaney—the glamorous, albeit reluctant, Duke of Wickham—found something to admire in her. There could be no denying it. His eyes did the talking for him and that knowledge filled her with a heady feeling of invincibility.

Other couples had joined them—Beth and her Mr Adcock, Adele and Lord Fryer amongst others—and Clio felt the moment of intimacy slipping away.

‘Your determination to protect your aunt’s feelings does you credit, and I would not have you disappoint her. It is I who shall be a disappointment, since marriage to her daughter is out of the question.’

‘Yes, I can quite see that it would be a *mésalliance*, and I think Beth will be relieved. At least she tried.’

‘Relieved?’ He affected mock affrontery. ‘I am not an ogre.’

‘Well obviously, I know that…’

‘He laughed. ‘You keep me honest with your plain speaking.’

‘I am glad to oblige. And as for respecting my aunt, it is easy to be grateful to her when one has been passed around between relatives like an inconvenient parcel. I firmly believe that my Welsh family only took me in because they were paid handsomely by my trustees who were also my official guardians to do so. My aunt is paid too, of course, although nothing that vulgar is ever discussed between us.

However, I am perfectly sure that she would have taken me anyway. She has a soft and warm heart and has made me feel as though I am doing her a service rather than the other way around.'

'I am glad that you are comfortable and well protected here.'

Comfortable was the last thing that Clio felt at that moment. Being envied by all the young ladies in the room was an alien experience, but not an unpleasant one. She felt reckless, willing to pretend for the duration of the dance that the duke had chosen to stand up with her for reasons that had nothing to do with their having joined forces to rout a would-be killer. She had recognised desire in his expression moments earlier, but now wondered if she had got it wrong and like any red-blooded male he had been temporarily overcome by a suffocating bout of lust.

That happened a lot, according to Beth, who claimed to know something on the subject but was hazy as to how she came by that information when Clio and Adele questioned her. Ezra admired her determination to put aside her embroidery in an effort to help him but Clio had yet to decide if he took her seriously insofar as his search for a murderer went. Part of her suspected that he regretted confiding in her and was pretending to include her just so that he knew what she was up to and could watch over her.

It was all so confusing.

Common sense was restored to Clio when she reminded herself that Ezra needed her, whether he realised it or not. Men handled sensitive issues in an all-guns-blazing way. Ladies could be more subtle and ask questions or observe out of character behaviour at gatherings without being suspected of ulterior motives. If someone here had been sent with murderous intent then it stood to reason that they would be nervous and act irrationally. As a student of human nature, Clio would study the main suspects and take note of their behaviour.

She did not know any of the guests well enough to be able to decide whether they were acting irrationally, she conceded, but hopefully something would give them away. It wasn't as if Ezra could keep watch over his cousin without raising suspicions, or Salford either. Clio shuddered at the thought of being anywhere near the man she despised, and yet for Ezra she would make the sacrifice.

She felt hot and cold all over when she recalled the brazen manner in which she had slipped her hand into his as they walked back to the house. It had been an impulsive gesture of sympathy that he'd probably misconstrued. Anyway, it was all his fault that she had acted in such a forward manner! He was the one who had commenced

intimacies. She had been convinced that he intended to kiss her when he'd pulled her into his arms in the orchard and her disappointment when he failed to do so had been absolute, which made the hand-holding episode that much harder to comprehend. She didn't want to seem desperate, or to make him think that she was…well, offering herself to him. God forbid that he thought she would be free with her favours.

The dance came to an end long before Clio was ready to be released from his arms. She dipped a graceful curtsey, hoping that her legs would still support her without the strength of his arms holding her up and asked him to excuse her. She had monopolised his company and would not continue to cling.

'You are leaving me unprotected?' he asked, feigning terror.

Clio smiled. 'You are perfectly capable of fending off a few harmless females.'

'You overestimate my courage.'

'Foolish man!'

She was still smiling as she walked away and didn't need to glance over her shoulder to know that he would be surrounded by hopeful aspirants for the next dance. Clio was careful to avoid the part of the room where Salford lay in wait for her and instead settled in a corner, partially concealed by a convenient pillar that gave her a good view of the room but behind which she could hide if necessary.

A quadrille had formed up. Clio chuckled when she noticed that Ezra hadn't been persuaded to participate.

'Miss Benton, may I have the pleasure?'

Clio started violently at the high-pitched voice accosting her. She had been so taken up with watching Ezra that she hadn't realised anyone had approached her. She abruptly turned and was confronted by Ezra's cousin, Silas Conway. She couldn't decline, and anyway he was a prime suspect in the murder plot. It would be useful to get a better idea of his character—a character that was a long way removed from the foppish individual he made himself out to be, she was willing to wager. And so she offered him both her hand and a smile.

'Are you sure it's wise for you to take to the floor, sir?' she asked solicitously. 'Dancing is a tiring business and I have heard it said that your health is not good.'

'It is true that I have a weak constitution and must take the greatest possible care,' he replied, 'but I am capable of performing a simple quadrille without sapping all my strength. We all of us have a duty to fulfil our social obligations.'

‘I am relieved to hear it,’ she replied, wondering why the man had sought her out, although she could harbour a guess. She was the first woman here in whom the duke had shown interest, somewhat dramatically by waltzing with her. Mr Conway probably thought she was unsuitable and was no doubt planning to give a full account of her to the dowager duchess.

If dancing with Ezra had been a joy, she was paying the price now. Mr Conway was heavy on his feet, clumsy and made several wrong turns without appearing to realise it. He had already stepped on her toes twice.

‘My cousin appears to enjoy your society,’ he remarked when the dance briefly brought them together.

‘You seem surprised,’ Clio replied in an arch tone.

‘Not surprised, merely interested. The duke is in great demand.’

‘That is hardly to be wondered at. He is, after all a duke, as well as being handsome and eligible. Any ambitious lady in search of a husband will turn in his direction.’

She swirled away from her miserable partner and smiled at the gentleman whom she now faced.

‘Are you one such?’ Mr Conway asked when they came together again.

‘That is none of your affair.’ She paused. ‘Is the duke aware that you take it upon yourself to vet any lady he smiles at?’

‘His lady mother trusts my judgement.’

‘Which is no answer at all,’ Clio replied, not bothering to point out his error when he again moved in the wrong direction, narrowly avoiding a collision with the lady behind him.

She sensed a steely resolve, a cunning about the man that defied his supposedly weak character and allowed herself to wonder if he really could be the assassin. Outwardly, he was the one with the most to gain.

‘What will happen to you when the duke marries?’ she asked capriciously. ‘His duchess will manage his household. Presumably the dowager will make way for her, which will leave you redundant.’

Mr Conway narrowed his eyes at her. ‘I am sure I shall continue to make myself useful to her grace. She depends upon me.’

‘Where is she now, as a matter of interest?’

‘Upstairs, enjoying a respite, I dare say. I’m sure she will return directly.’

It was an outright lie, delivered with all the panache of an accomplished liar. There was a malevolence about the man that truly disturbed Clio. There was nothing he wouldn't do to secure his own future, she sensed, or to remove anyone who stood in his way. He must be aware that Ezra disliked him and would not tolerate him indefinitely, but was he capable of committing cold-blooded murder?

When the dance came to an end, Clio was no nearer to having reached a decision.

She thanked him with minimum civility, wondering if she had passed muster in his eyes. Absolutely sure that she had not, especially since she had made no effort whatsoever to hide her disdain for the horrible man. She walked briskly away, still unsure what he had hoped to achieve by dancing with her.

Not looking where she was going, she had forgotten all about Captain Salford and almost walked straight into him.

'Careful!' A hand shot out to steady her and lingered on her bare shoulder. Clio was repulsed by his touch and shook his hand free.

'Excuse me,' she said, attempting to walk past him, but he blocked the way with his body.

'Well met, Clio. Do me the honour.'

'No, thank you.' She again tried to pass him but this time he caught hold of her arm.

'That is not polite.'

'Nor is your refusal to accept my disinclination for dancing. I don't want to stand up with you, Captain, and have no intention of putting myself through that particular torture. My toes are already black and blue, thanks to Mr Conway's efforts.'

'Ridiculous child! I will not step on your toes.'

'No, you will not, since you will not have the opportunity. Does that make my feelings on the matter plain or would you like me to speak a little louder?'

He narrowed his eyes at her. 'I do so enjoy the thrill of the chase. It has been a while since I encountered any resistance. But know this, the more you deny me, the more determined I become to change your mind.'

Clio laughed contemptuously. 'And they say chivalry is dead.'

He tightened his hold on her. 'I want to talk to you.' He tried to steer her towards the terrace but she dug her toes in.

'You're hurting me,' she said, raising her voice so that it could be heard above the music and laughter. Several heads turned in their

direction and he instantly released her.

'My apologies,' he said. 'The violence of my affections sometimes makes me forget my own strength.'

She shook her head, conscious of her floral headdress slipping to one side. She had told Daisy it was bound to happen, but her maid had insisted and Clio didn't like to curtail her talents. 'If you will not let me be then I shall retire to my room, where even you would not dare to venture. Really, you are being horribly tiresome.'

'I had hoped it wouldn't come to this,' he said, sighing.

'Come to what?' she asked, her suspicions aroused.

'Your father made his wishes regarding you and me very apparent before his death. He wrote them down, in fact.'

'Nonsense! He would have told me.'

'Would he? Perhaps he intended to, but there was no time.' A calculating light shone in his eyes. 'Perhaps he did but you would prefer not to admit it because you have set your sights too high.'

Clio bridled. 'You insult me, sir!'

'My apologies. I know you are not dishonest and I accept that your father didn't have time to express his wishes to you in person. However, I have his letter. I will have it delivered to your room and you will see for yourself.'

'Even if what you say is true—'

'You doubt my word?' he asked in a tone of mild reproach.

She looked up at him with hostility. 'I do.'

'My, but you are outspoken.'

'For which you only have yourself to blame. If you had come here without first implying to Lady Fletcher that there was an understanding between us, I would have received you in a more civil manner and listened to your declaration, even though it is unlikely that anything would have persuaded me to accept it. Not even your assurances of my father's approval.' She paused. 'If indeed he did approve of you. I hear tell that you and he were not on the best of terms immediately before his death.'

'How on earth…' His gaze drifted in Ezra's direction and his expression darkened. 'Do not believe everything you hear.'

'Send your letter up and I will read it. That is the only promise I am willing to make. Good night.'

She turned on her heel and headed for the stairs, conscious of Ezra standing to one side, watching her go. She desperately wanted to look

his way in search of reassurance but knew he would see the conflicting emotions she was too disturbed to conceal writ large across her countenance. She absolutely could not afford to lean on him, she reminded herself, especially not after she had so brazenly taken *his* hand.

Salford's claims on her affections were hers to resolve alone.



It took every ounce of Ezra's self-control not to follow Clio up the stairs. It was still early, the party would go on for hours yet and he wondered why she had felt the need to retire so soon. He sensed that her withdrawal was not temporary and that she required solitude in order to…to what? She had looked disconcerted following the trampling that her toes had endured during the quadrille, which was an event in itself. Silas never danced, as evidenced by his inability to recall the steps, and yet he had invited Clio to stand up immediately after Ezra himself had taken to the floor with her, which was concerning.

He was up to something.

Clio had then been accosted by Salford and he had no idea what had passed between them, although from a distance they appeared to be having a disagreement. Ezra had tried to edge closer but Salford had taken her to the opposite side of the room and Ezra's progress across it had been hampered every step of the way by females keen to engage his attention. Good manners required him to bestow just a little of it upon each of them.

By the time Ezra reached Clio's side of the room she was already heading for the stairs, looking angry and discomposed. Ezra knew with absolute certainty that the party would lose its appeal for him if she was no longer a part of it, and the urge to chase after her, to take her in his arms and dispel the hurt that he'd seen swirling in the depths of her eyes was compelling.

Ye gods, was he in a very different kind of danger than the one he had anticipated when accepting this invitation? Admiration for the chit's lively individuality was one thing, but he had not consciously thought beyond that point. She was a child, twelve years his junior, who knew absolutely nothing of the adult world.

'Damn!' he muttered, excusing himself from the females surrounding him and walking away. He had lost his taste for dancing

too.

Assuming that Godfrey must have returned from the village by now, he took the stairs two at a time and retired to his room. A tug of the bell rope brought Godfrey to him surprisingly quickly.

'What news?' he asked, throwing off his coat, then his neckcloth.

'Seems Lady Walder stayed at the Oak a week ago for two nights, but not under her own name. She travelled with a maid and registered as a Mrs Francis. She was recognised when she came through the village again to join us here. Of course, her true identity is now known and it's an endless cause for speculation. The locals think it their right to know why she came as someone else the first time around.'

'Most likely a tryst,' Ezra remarked, throwing himself onto the window seat. 'Either that or she wanted to be close to Lady Fletcher for some reason. But why? They are acquaintances. She could simply have called.'

'You haven't asked who else was seen in the area at about the same time,' Godfrey said, looking uncharacteristically sombre.

'I have not but it's clear you want to tell me. Out with it, man!'

'A gent answering Lord Brennan's description, is who,' Godfrey replied.

'What the devil…' Ezra ran a hand through his hair, totally perplexed. 'Those two are in it together? Why? And if they are, why did they need to meet to discuss their plans in a tavern? Brennan still has a place he calls home in Surrey, even if it is mortgaged to the hilt and he's in danger of losing it. Why risk showing their hand for no obvious reason?'

'Well, that's the question.'

'She has done her very best to sweet talk her way into my good graces this evening.' Ezra paced the length of the room as he thought the matter through, watched by an adoring Merlin who flapped his tail every time Ezra came in reach of his position stretched out in front of the empty fireplace. 'That is not the behaviour of an assassin.'

'It is if the assassin in question wants to gain your trust.'

'No, we overheard her telling Salford that she was determined to win my affections. There was no mention of ulterior motives, which there would have been if they were in a partnership and meeting to compare progress. But if they are partners in crime, why is she meeting him for a romantic liaison if she is involved with Brennan, my mother's lover?' Ezra scratched his head. 'This is getting damnably complicated.'

‘We?’ Godfrey flexed a brow in the impertinent manner that was second nature to him. Godfrey was no respecter of Ezra’s elevated status, which was one of the reasons why he endured in his employ. That and the fact that he had proved his unswerving loyalty time without number.

‘Miss Benton and I.’

‘Ah, of course.’ Godfrey grinned.

‘We know why Brennan wants me out the way and I suppose Lady Walder could be hedging her bets. If I take her up on her not-so-subtle invitation I get to live. If not…’

‘That’s no kind of choice. Besides, if she’s thrown in her lot with the devil, she won’t be able to back out. Whoever’s killing your family off is too clever, and has laid his plans too well to permit accomplices a change of heart.’

‘He will have evidence to use against her if she tried to renege.’ Ezra shook his head. ‘But surely that would implicate him too. No,’ he added, not giving Godfrey a chance to respond. ‘As you just pointed out, Brennan is too damned cunning to implicate himself.’

‘Precisely.’

Ezra tugged at Merlin’s ear when the dog got up and shook himself. ‘Let’s see if we can make any sense out of this farrago.’ He tapped his forefinger against his lips, attempting to arrange his thoughts into methodical order. ‘Salford wants Miss Benton for her fortune and assumed he wouldn’t meet with any opposition.’

‘How hard can it be for a man of his experience and popularity to win the heart of a foolish seventeen-year-old?’

Ezra chuckled. ‘That was his first mistake. He underestimated Miss Benton’s intelligence and overestimated his own charms. Anyway, he would have been confident of success, and once he’d got his hands on her inheritance, she would have served her purpose and be surplus to requirements. I saw him with Lady Walder and he’s completely smitten.’

‘He needs the funds to keep the lady in style.’

Ezra gave a grim nod. ‘That is my assumption.’

‘But now we think that she is in cahoots with Brennan.’ Godfrey fell onto the nearest chair and scratched his head. ‘You’re right, guv’nor, it is complex. You think Brennan is cold enough to marry your mother before you’re…well, cold in your grave and then carry on with Lady Walder?’

‘Nothing that scoundrel does would surprise me,’ Ezra replied

scowling. ‘My mother took herself off in her curricle this evening after dinner with just her coachman driving her, as a matter of fact. She could only have gone to keep an assignation with Brennan. As far as I am aware, she only has one lover, and she could meet any other acquaintances in this district during daylight hours in the prescribed fashion. There would be no need for clandestine outings.’

‘Which means Brennan must be in the district somewhere. He probably came down to take temporary lodgings, which is why Lady Walder met him at the Oak.’

‘Possibly.’

‘Barnes is loyal to a fault. It’s no good quizzing him on her grace’s movements and demanding to know where he drove her. He’ll take her secrets to the grave.’

‘There’s more than one way to curtail an ambitious cur. Brennan lives permanently in Surrey but we now assume that he has taken lodgings close by, ready to console my mother when I meet my maker.’

‘I can make enquiries. Find out if any houses in the locality have recently been let.’

‘Do that, and see if Gibson is back. He followed the duchess’s carriage on horseback. He will know where she went.’

‘I’ll do that now and bring some hot water up when I return.’

In shirtsleeves, Ezra sat in his window embrasure, looking out at gardens cast into flickering pools of light by the flambeaux illuminating the terrace beneath him. His mind was occupied with thoughts of Clio. Salford had said something to distress her, he could tell that much simply by the stony set to her features and the obvious effort she was making to control her emotions as she swept past him, barely sparing him a glance as she headed for the stairs.

‘What did he do that frightened you, my love?’ he asked aloud.

And Silas. What game was he playing? It would be unwise, he knew, to underestimate a cousin who disguised a devious character and quick brain behind an obsequious demeanour. A man who would have a great deal to lose if Ezra took a wife and decided to dispense with his services. A man who would most definitely have to give up his comfortable lifestyle if Ezra’s mother chose to marry Brennan. He was bound to be aware of the affair, and by putting his own interests first he might well have seen the value in making himself as indispensable to Brennan as he had to Ezra’s mother.

Ezra felt moody and disgruntled as he awaited Godfrey’s return. His man was gone for a long time but when he finally came back it

was with the news that his lady mother had also just returned to the estate.

'She went to a small manor house about five miles away and stayed for an hour, your grace,' Godfrey told him. 'Gibson saw Lord Brennan as plain as day when he came out of the house and helped the duchess into her carriage.'

'Well then, our next most obvious step is to see whether Lady Walder visits him there. Have Gibson watch her like a hawk, Godfrey. If she leaves the estate for any reason, even in the company of the other ladies when they go on excursions, I want her followed. It would be easy enough for her to slip away on some pretext or other to meet Brennan. I need absolute proof that they are in cahoots.'

'We're pretty sure that they must be, given that she stayed at the Oak and entertained him there.'

'Speaking of the local tavern, take yourself down there in the morning and see if you can find out who owns the property that Brennan has presumably leased.'

'How will that help us?'

'Absolutely no idea, but knowledge is power.'

'Right you are.' Godfrey poured the water he had brought up with him into the ewer, and Ezra splashed his hands and face with it.

'I won't need you anymore tonight,' he said, once he had dried himself off.

'It's still early.'

'One can have too much of a good thing.'

Godfrey chuckled. 'Nothing to do with the fact that Miss Benton has already retired.'

Ezra's face emerged from behind his towel as he flexed a brow at Godfrey. 'And you would know that because…'

'Because I was having a delightful conversation with her pretty maid when Miss Benton rang her bell and Daisy scampered off to serve her.'

'I am sure Miss Benton regrets cramping your style. Has Daisy returned to the servants' hall?'

'Why?' Godfrey looked genuinely shocked. 'You don't mean to visit the chit, surely?'

'Idle curiosity,' Ezra replied laconically.

'How else do you think I knew for certain that Miss Benton had retired for the night?' Godfrey asked, grinning. 'Daisy returned below

stairs and told me so. We had resumed our conversation, before you interrupted it, that is. I do wish the gentry would have more consideration.'

Ezra laughed. 'Go back to your maid and enjoy her smiles. As I said, I shall not need you again tonight.'

'Don't suppose you will,' Godfrey replied, chuckling as he let himself out of the room.

Left alone, the idea of calling upon Clio had taken root in Ezra's head and he couldn't seem to shake it off. It would be madness in its purest form, highly irregular, lunacy even, but he needed to talk to her, to assure himself that Salford had not insulted her in a manner that would justify Ezra's intervention.

He knew that sleep would elude him until he had heard that assurance from her own sweet lips. He groaned when he thought of the lips in question and wondered if he would be able to harness his passions when alone in a bedchamber with the female who rather alarmingly was beginning to occupy an increasing number of his thoughts.

Don't risk it, the voice of his conscience advised.

Put her interests first, his gentlemanly instincts responded.

She was unconventional, he reasoned, but reckless too, and he didn't want her to do anything rash that she would later regret. Ezra himself was above rash behaviour, of course—waltzing with a chit barely out of the schoolroom in front of an assembly of society's elite and holding her far too close notwithstanding. That had been reckless, and he was now paying a heavy price for it as recollections of her curvaceous body beneath his questing hands played havoc with his equilibrium.

Even so, he simply had to see her. Now. Tonight. Immediately.

The situation had become more complex. She had a right to know about Lady Walder's convoluted involvement and he would never have a better opportunity to speak to her alone without fear of interruption or of being overheard.

She does know, his conscience pointed out.

Even so…

Before he could talk sense into himself, Ezra uncoiled his tall frame from the window seat, crossed the room and opened the door. The party was still in full swing. He could hear the sound of music, conversation and laughter from the floor below. He could hear the sound of girlish giggles coming from the picture gallery and the deep, coaxing tone of the man who had engaged that female's attention. He

happened to know that Clio's room was in the opposite direction and so he would not need to interrupt what was clearly a tryst, turning instead away from it.

He paused when he reached her door, wondering if she would have actually retired. The thought of seeing her in her bed stirred up all sorts of inappropriate desires that almost occasioned a change of heart. He did not possess *that* much self-control. He allowed himself a wry smile, thinking that as far as Clio was concerned, he had no self-control whatsoever. If anyone had told him beforehand that he would come to this party and visit an unmarried chit in her bedchamber through choice he would have laughed in their faces.

Shaking his head at his own folly, Ezra heard voices approaching. Aware that he couldn't stand about outside a lady's bedroom door indefinitely, he gave a perfunctory knock and opened the door in question.

'What is it, Daisy?'

Clio sat on her window seat, much as Ezra had been until a few moments before, presumably mulling over the events of the day. She held a letter in one hand and wore a robe over her night attire. Her hair had been loosely braided and fell in a long rope over one shoulder.

'It's me. Can I come in?'

'Ezra?' She leapt to her feet. 'What on earth…?'

'We need to talk.' He took her hand and led her back to the window seat. She fell back onto it and he took a place by her side, releasing her hand and ensuring that a respectable amount of space separated them.

'Why? What about?' Her eyes were wide and wary. 'Has something happened that I need to know about?'

'You appeared distressed when you left the drawing room, and I was worried. What did Salford say to overset you?'

She sent him a disbelieving look. 'You risked coming to my room at night just to ask me that?'

'I feel responsible,' he said, thinking how lame that sounded, hoping she would not assume he had come with alternative intentions in mind.

'Thank you, but there is absolutely no need for you to feel that way and this is…well, inappropriate.'

'I promise to behave myself.'

The suggestion of a smile touched her lips. 'How reassuring,' she

said.

‘I have news that you should hear,’ he said, worried that she would send him away; fairly sure that she would not. If she was like the majority of the other females in attendance, out to trap him, then he wouldn’t even have considered taking the risk of visiting her room. His intentions really were noble.

Probably.

‘Tell me,’ she said softly, looking away from him and fiddling with the sash that held her robe closed.



Chapter Thirteen

Clio had been feeling despondent, unsure what to make of the ambiguous contents of the letter that the captain had given her to read. The sight of her father's familiar handwriting, mentioning her in such dispassionate terms, had given her a jolt, despite the fact that he had never treated her as anything other than a commodity. And now here was Ezra, accosting her in her own chamber. She had been thinking about him in such a concentrated manner, so confident he would be able to explain the peculiarities that it was almost as if the power of those thoughts had brought him to her door.

He took her hand, just as she had taken his so brazenly an hour or two earlier, and led her back to the window seat. She was acutely aware of her state of semi-undress and wondered if she ought to do something about it. But what could she do that wouldn't make her seem immature? Sending him away was out of the question, even though she knew that she ought to. Every nerve ending in her body sang with anticipation, despite the fact that she didn't feel in any danger of being compromised.

He was still fully clothed, albeit casually, which made her feel even more disadvantaged. He filled the room with his starkly masculine presence, fuelling the atmosphere with an air of expectancy that created yearnings she didn't properly understand. This simply wouldn't do! Clio frantically sought her mind for something mature to say. What *did* one say when a duke accosted one in a bedchamber as though it was the most natural thing in the world, she wondered? Was there a prescribed reaction? Her imagination failed her and she looked up at Ezra in a state of mute indecision.

'What did Salford do to make you leave the party?' he asked.

His voice cut through her confused reverie and restored her ability to think in a vaguely coherent fashion. 'I was under the impression that you came here in such an unorthodox fashion in order to tell me

something vital, not cross-question me,' she replied curtly. 'You realise, of course, that if we are caught then all hell will break loose.'

He grinned at her. 'I'll risk it if you will.'

'Oh, for goodness sake!' She flapped a hand at him, fighting a smile. 'Don't you ever take anything seriously?'

'Not if I can help it, but just so that we are clear, I take your safety very seriously and make no apology for worrying about you.'

Clio swallowed, aware from the ardent nature of his expression that he spoke the truth. 'I am not your responsibility.'

'I have decided to make you so.'

'Just like that?' Clio wondered why she felt such a pressing need to argue the point. She had been looking out for herself for as long as she could recall, and the thought of an authoritative man of the duke's ilk offering her his protection was wonderfully reassuring. Then it occurred to her that ladies living beneath a gentleman's protection were ordinarily members of the *demi-monde*. 'If you imagine that I am so desperate for affection, or feel so honoured to be noticed by you that I will agree to become your mistress, then you quite mistake my character,' she snapped.

'Good heavens!' His eyebrows disappeared beneath his hairline. 'Whatever gave you such an idea? What on earth do you take me for?'

Clio could see that she had insulted him, and felt downright foolish. She blushed furiously. He clearly didn't think of her as a desirable woman and really had decided to protect her because she was the daughter, the *child*, of a man whom he had served with and respected. Far from feeling reassured, Clio was imbued with a very different emotion. Duke or not, she would make him notice her!

'What else am I supposed to think when you wander into my bedchamber in the dead of night, certain that your presence will be welcomed?'

'I am not welcome?' He looked so totally shocked that Clio laughed in spite of herself.

'You are impossible,' she said.

Ezra shook his head and sighed. 'What am I to do with you?' he muttered.

'That's a question perhaps left for a more respectable time and place.'

He briefly ran his fingers down the hand that lay in the space between them; an intimate gesture that reinforced the manner in which he could so easily stir her passions. It was most unfair. He was

experienced and he knew precisely what he was doing to her, even if Clio had yet to decide what had made him do it. She, on the other hand, was totally out of her depth as she struggled to navigate uncharted waters.

'You don't need to worry about my marrying a man who might well have been commissioned to murder you,' Clio said, turning the conversation back to his original question. 'I don't like Captain Salford, but you are already well aware of that. He told me just now that my father wanted him to marry and care for me after he was gone, as though my father's supposed plans for me would ensure my instant obedience.' She waved the letter that the captain had given her for emphasis. 'He even claims that my father wrote his wishes down.'

Ezra threw back his head and laughed. 'Is that all? He must truly be desperate.'

'Desperate to settle for me?' Clio gathered her hands together in her lap and rippled her shoulders indignantly. 'Thank you very much!'

'Don't be such a goose. That is not what I meant, and well you know it.'

'Do I?' Unsure why she felt the need to fight with him, Clio forced herself to relax and felt the tension recede from her rigid shoulders. 'Why do you describe him as desperate? Well, obviously I know the answer to that. He requires my fortune in order to keep Lady Walder in the style she has come to expect.'

'Very likely, but producing a letter from your father shows a degree of planning—which in turn implies that he'd considered the possibility of rejection and prepared for it.'

'You don't think that my father wrote the letter?' She turned to face him, giving him her full attention for the first time since he had entered her room uninvited. 'It is his handwriting, there's no question of that.'

'And yet he didn't see fit to mention his plans to you?'

'I don't suppose he expected to die before he had an opportunity to do so.'

'And yet he died at home. You nursed him, I am told, and he knew the end was close.'

Clio shrugged one shoulder. 'True, but I don't suppose he took my feelings into account. He would simply have assumed…'

Ezra cupped her chin in the palm of one capable hand, stroking it between his fingers as he smiled provocatively into her eyes. 'He didn't understand your character at all, did he?' he asked softly.

Clio swallowed, understanding better now why she had instinctively tried to fight with him when he'd first invaded her privacy. She could keep her wits about her when they were at odds with one another, after a fashion, but whenever he looked at her with such glowing concern, her thoughts turned in all sorts of inappropriate directions.

'I was not a boy, so why would he bother getting to know me?' she asked, snatching her chin from his grasp and looking away again.

'May I see the letter?'

Without saying a word, Clio handed it to him and Ezra walked over to the still-lit candle so that he could scan the contents. 'It doesn't mention you by name,' he said, casting it aside with a dismissive flip of his wrist. 'Your father could have been referring to the disposition of his estate as easily as he could be referring to your future. He doesn't even address Salford by name. The letter starts off "Dear Sir". It could have been to his steward.'

'It might surprise you to learn that I had reached that conclusion for myself,' she said archly. 'It is beyond insulting that the captain would assume I don't have the wits to see through such an obvious ruse, or that I would comply with my father's so-called wishes even if it was genuine.' She grunted indignantly. 'He really is desperate. We both know what drives that desperation and it is most certainly not a desire to fulfil my father's fictitious wishes. Nor is it a passionate affection for me.'

'He was attempting to impress upon you the duty that you owed to your father.' Ezra tapped the letter against his fingers.

'Then he will be disappointed in that respect. I had lost respect for my father long before he died.' She sent him a defiant smile. 'There! I have said it. Make of it what you will.'

'I respected the man as an intelligent strategist and leader of men on the battlefield,' Ezra replied. 'I did not know him well personally, and I cannot approve of his neglect of you. He may have regretted the fact that you were not the son he desired.' Ezra paused, fixing her with a deep, probing look so intense that it caused her to blush and turn away. 'I on the other hand am so very glad that you are not.'

'You said you had news.' Clio continued to look away from him and cleared her throat. She could stand up to Ezra when they were at odds, but she had absolutely no idea how to respond to a compliment that seemed genuine. God's beard, the man was an enigma and she couldn't make him out at all.

'Ah, so I did.'

Clio listened as he explained about his mother's destination that evening.

'Brennan must be the mastermind!' she said, leaning towards him in her anxiety for his wellbeing and only realising that the sudden movement had caused her robe to gape open when his gaze fastened on her bosom. She sat back again and tightened her belt. 'There can be no other explanation, and your mother is playing into his hands. She must be warned.'

'Out of the question! She may not be the most maternal woman in England, but she still has feelings. She has already lost two sons as well as a husband and will never believe our wild theories, especially if I accuse her lover of orchestrating her family's demise.'

'No, I suppose when you put it like that…' She nibbled the end of her index finger as she thought the matter through and then turned to face him again, in command of herself, after a fashion. 'Then what shall we do about it?'

'*We* shall do nothing. I shall handle it.'

Clio tossed her head, too irritated to worry about the growing attraction that she found it harder by the minute to fight when in such close and secluded company with her fiercely attractive yet unattainable duke. She found his magnetic allure harder to resist with every meeting.

Especially this one.

'That is precisely the annoyingly protective response I anticipated. Really, your grace, if you do not require my help and suggestions, what are you really doing here in my bedchamber?'



Ezra was in trouble, the like of which he had never been in before, not even in the heat of battle. And this latest conflict truly terrified him. It had nothing to do with the threat to his life and everything to do with the charms of the siren seated beside him in her night attire, her eyes flashing with irritation. He was now fighting a war of a very different kind—against his own emotions, his instincts, his desires.

She was right to ask why he had made excuses to come to her room. He must be a candidate for Bedlam, he decided. He had convinced himself that he would be able to harness his passions. Ha! It just went to show that a body was capable of convincing itself of

anything when the desire was strong enough. And his desire for this wild, impractical, unconventional and so very young female was in danger of running out of control. He hadn't allowed himself to consider that she might well be in a state of undress when he accosted her, but of course he had known on a visceral level that she might well be. Or he would have, had he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility.

He was paying a heavy price for his lunacy, finding the temptation to be a living hell. Ezra had to be overly fond of punishing himself, he thought. It was the only explanation that made sense of the torture he'd sought out through choice. When she leaned forward and her robe had fallen open, his physical reaction had been difficult to conceal. How he had resisted taking matters further he still could not have said.

'I admire your courage. You are your father's daughter in that respect, no question,' he told her, focusing his attention upon the picture on the wall facing him. There wasn't much chance of a harmless landscape sending his mind on a sensual detour. 'However, I must ask you to consider. If I am right then my father, and then his successor, my older brother, have both been ruthlessly murdered, and no one other than me suspects that there was anything suspicious about their deaths.'

Clio nodded. 'But no one has any reason to murder me. If Captain Salford is involved, then the opposite applies. If he has been engaged to murder you, I very much doubt that he will be paid a tenth of the amount he hopes to steal from me through marriage. He has every reason in the world to keep me alive.' She grinned up at him. 'But not you. We already know that he bears you a grudge, and if he now thinks my disinterest is because you…' She paused and her cheeks again flushed bright red. 'Well, because you are paying me attention then he will have a double incentive to do away with you.' She shook a finger at him. 'You should not have waltzed with me. It sent entirely the wrong message to everyone who observed us.'

'And yet I do not regret it.'

She shook her head. 'Sometimes I think you *want* to die.'

'Oh good heavens no!' He sent her an intimate smile. 'I now have a most compelling reason to stay alive. Anyway, we cannot be sure that Salford is involved. He might want you alive, but I am certain that Brennan would sweep you out of the way without a second thought if he even suspected that you were aware of his plans.'

Clio's brow creased with concern. 'You seem awfully sure that it's him.'

‘He is in the area,’ Ezra replied. ‘My man followed my mother’s carriage to a rented house not five miles from here.’

‘Even so, perhaps his motive is nothing more sinister than opportunism. Your mother is careful to maintain appearances, and since you will not permit Brennan over your threshold she is obliged to be more inventive when it comes to arranging assignations with him.’

‘What do you know of those sorts of assignations?’ he asked, fixing her with a provocative smile.

‘You see! You are laughing and not taking the situation at all seriously.’

‘I can look after myself.’

‘I dare say your brother thought the same thing.’

‘And look what happened to him.’ He sighed as his fingers traced the curve of her face with a delicate touch. ‘He, a grown man twice your size could not defend himself, yet you seem to think that you can resolve an issue that has already cost two men their lives. What must I do to make you realise that you will never succeed?’

‘Don’t presume to know what I think, your grace,’ she replied indignantly, standing and placing fisted hands on slender hips.

Ezra was astonished by her aggressive response. Even so, he was obliged to suppress a smile. She was delightful when roused to a state of youthful outrage. She was a child-woman on the cusp of adulthood with a point to prove to the world, and more particularly to herself. That was how he must try to think of her, as an adolescent rather than a grown woman with set views and opinions of her own. One glance at the curves beneath her thin night attire, enhanced by the candlelight immediately behind her, and he accepted that such a ruse wouldn’t serve.

‘Indeed, my lady, I would not dare!’

‘Wretch!’ She laughed and shook her head, her anger abating as quickly as it had sprung up. She was probably unaware that the gesture loosened the ribbon holding her braid in place and that long strands of hair escaped to tumble down her back. Damn it all, she wasn’t making things easy for him! ‘I am sure that there is nothing you wouldn’t dare to do,’ she said, resuming her seat. ‘We could do worse than set a trap for Brennan,’ she added. ‘If indeed he is anything more sinister than a man pursuing his heart’s desire.’

‘He is by far the most likely candidate.’

‘You have forgotten about your cousin,’ she replied, clearly unimpressed by his tunnel vision.

‘Not for a moment.’ Ezra folded his hands together to prevent one of them from picking up a strand of her hair and running it through his fingers in a sensual gesture of familiarity. Ye gods, this was torture!

‘But you do not look upon him as a serious alternative to Brennan, which of course is precisely what he wants.’

‘He danced with you.’

‘Yes.’ She instinctively reached for the toes of her left foot and gave them a squeeze. ‘I shall have the bruises for days. I didn’t see him approach so I didn’t have time to think of an excuse not to stand up with him.’ She gave a wry smile. ‘My toes will forgive me eventually, I dare say.’

‘What did he have to say to you?’

‘He seemed interested in my connection to you. Not that there is one, of course, but one can understand why he might have been left harbouring that misconception. After all, you didn’t dance with anyone else, which was most unreasonable of you. I know why you manhandled me into that waltz…’

‘Manhandled?’ Ezra flexed a challenging brow, endlessly amused by her manner of expression. ‘Dukes do not manhandle young ladies.’

‘Manhandled,’ she repeated emphatically. ‘It wasn’t as though you requested the pleasure. As usual, you just assumed and gave me no choice.’

‘If you had not wanted to dance with me, little one, you would have made your feelings apparent to the entire room.’

Clio grinned. ‘Yes, I suppose I would have. It is most disconcerting that you understand my contrary nature so well when we are barely acquainted.’

‘I would argue that we are well acquainted,’ he countered, enjoying himself enormously. Enjoying himself far too much. ‘I am, after all, in your bedchamber and you haven’t yet raised the alarm.’

‘I still very well might, but for the fact that I know you came with no ulterior motives in mind.’ *Oh, Clio!* ‘Besides, tongues are already wagging, one assumes.’

‘They must gossip about someone,’ Ezra replied, feigning boredom. ‘One grows accustomed to having one’s every word and gesture endlessly speculated about.’

‘You might.’

‘And I have made things difficult for you. I dare say you will be questioned and won’t know what to say to your inquisitors. I am sorry

about that. Whatever you tell them, you can be sure that I shall not deny it. I am entirely to blame.'

'No question.' She smiled at him. 'Anyway, as to your cousin, he has certainly got entirely the wrong impression and I think he is secretly worried. You fear for your life and I will not hamper that life by forcing you to make the ultimate sacrifice.' She shook her head emphatically. 'That would not be fair.'

'Life is not fair, darling.' Ezra took a deep breath and adjured himself to behave. 'What made you suppose that Silas's suspicions were aroused?'

'Well,' she replied with a mischievous twinkle, 'if I had to endure the embarrassment of dancing with a man who doesn't know his left foot from his right, I decided I might as well exploit the opportunity. In the spirit of helping our enquiry, naturally, I might inadvertently have suggested that his own comfortable existence would come to an end once you marry.'

Ezra shook his head, laughing in spite of himself. 'If you seriously suspect him then goading him into taking action is not the best way to keep me alive.'

'Nonsense! Are we going to sit about waiting for the killer to strike or should we lure him into indiscretion? Thus far, his actions appear to have been carefully orchestrated but if we can somehow tempt him away from his plans for you, he might well make a mistake.'

'Silas faints at the sight of blood.'

'Or so he would have you believe. You underestimate him, Ezra. There is a sharp mind and a resentful character behind the foppish façade.'

Ezra permitted his surprise to show. 'You have deduced that much simply by dancing with him?'

'I have been watching him since he arrived. Most people avoid him. He is accustomed to being overlooked, so when he isn't fussing over your mother's comforts, he thinks no one is watching him and lets his guard down. I have mentioned to you before that I have seen the way he sometimes looks at you with a combination of loathing and envy radiating from his eyes.'

'I have never noticed.'

'He would hardly let *you* see, which is why I contend that he is artful.'

'Then I shall not assume that he's as harmless as he makes himself out to be.' But Ezra still doubted whether Silas could have pulled the

wool over his eyes for all this time. Perhaps that was because he didn't want to admit to having been duped. Even so, he was man enough to accept that Clio could well be in the right of it. 'He did once mention that he harboured a desire to tread the boards and was only held back from so doing because it is not a profession worthy of a gentleman.'

'Well, there you are then. The man considers himself a frustrated Hamlet. I stand vindicated.'

Ezra smiled at her. 'My mind has not been entirely idle.' At least it had not been before Clio had taken almost complete occupation of it and drove all other thoughts from his head. 'And I do intend to set a trap to lure the assassin in.'

'How do you intend to do that?'

'Well, now that I am aware that Brennan is residing in Midhurst I can—'

'Midhurst?' She sent him a sharp look. 'Is that where he is? Why did you not say?'

'I told you he was five miles away. I did not think the precise location significant.' Ezra was at a loss to know why she had become so agitated. 'Why has this intelligence excited you?'

She gave an impatient tut. 'That is the destination of Lady Fletcher's al fresco luncheon tomorrow. I thought you would be aware.'

'I don't take much notice of her programme, I'm afraid.'

'Well, we ladies are supposed to be travelling in carriages, escorted by you gentlemen on horseback.' Clio tapped the fingers of one hand against her opposite forearm. 'I wonder who decided upon the location.'

'It wouldn't surprise me to discover that it was my mother's suggestion.'

'Well, if an attack is to be launched and Brennan is behind it, that is where it will happen, you just mark my words, and you will be an easy target. Far easier to get to out in the open than you would be on this estate. You had best develop gout between now and then and not go.'

Ezra laughed. 'Thank you for your concern, but gout does not ordinarily afflict men of my age, and certainly not overnight.'

'I can see that you are still not taking this affair seriously.' She tutted. 'Why do gentlemen take such a cavalier attitude towards life and death?'

'I have a very compelling reason for wishing to remain alive, my

love,' he replied softly, fixing her with an intense look so imbued with passion that he could detect her responding blush even in the flickering light of a single candle that had almost burned down.

She swallowed. 'Well, naturally you do, but we need to form a strategy. And don't tell me that I cannot involve myself,' she added, wagging a finger at him. 'It will not be as easy for me as it might once have been, given that you singled me out so blatantly this evening. Everyone will be watching me as well as you and… That's why you did it, isn't it?' Deep betrayal and bitter disappointment filtered through her expression. 'You deliberately favoured me so that you would have a valid reason to dispense with my help.' Her eyes widened as she fixed him with a look of disdain. 'You didn't have to go that far. You could just have avoided me.'

She turned away from him, muttering beneath her breath, and Ezra knew that she was hurt. He ought to leave matters there. Better she remained safe than take foolish risks to ensure *his* safety. But something stronger than his own will refused to leave her thinking ill of him. He had to make her understand that he waltzed with her for one reason and one reason only.

He had danced with her because he'd wanted to.

'You could not be more wrong,' he said in a softly persuasive drawl. 'Look at me, Clio.'

She turned her head slowly, facing him with apparent reluctance. 'I don't require false assurances,' she told him. 'I hope I am not that fragile.'

'No more would I offer them.' He took her hand and laced his fingers through hers. 'I waltzed with you because I couldn't help myself. There was absolutely no one else in the room that any amount of coercion would have persuaded me to stand up with.'

Her eyes clouded over with a combination of passion and uncertainty, and it was suddenly beyond Ezra's dwindling self-control to leave her in any lingering doubt. He slowly lowered his head and covered her lips with his own. She tasted as sweet as wine and as fresh as summer. Ezra was empowered by her instinctive response and impossibly aroused by it. He slipped his arms around her slender body and deepened the kiss, a man with a point to prove and a passion to slake.

On the verge of allowing his hands to wander over those enticing curves, Ezra somehow managed to prevent them and reluctantly broke the kiss. He was gratified when a small moan of protest slipped past her guard.

‘You always do that,’ she said in a dazed voice. ‘You start things and then break them off when they are on the point of getting interesting.’

Ezra laughed. ‘You are supposed to slap my face for taking liberties.’

‘If I intended to do any slapping, it would have happened the moment you invaded my bedchamber. It’s far too late for that now. If you are found here, everyone will say that I encouraged you. They will be disgusted by my machinations and hold you entirely blameless.’

‘And yet I am the one to blame.’

‘Obviously I know that.’

They both laughed and the awkwardness between them fell away.

‘Actually,’ she said in a pensive tone after the briefest of pauses, ‘a disagreement between us would perhaps not be such a bad idea. A very public disagreement at the luncheon tomorrow. I will take loud offence at some remark you make to me and storm off. You will mutter to the other gentlemen about my unreasonable behaviour and how you should have known better than to show any interest in a child barely out of the schoolroom.’

‘For what purpose am I to lose patience with you?’ he asked.

‘Oh, do use your brain, Ezra. It isn’t *that* complicated.’

Easy for her to say. She was thinking rationally, whereas he was still revelling in the aftermath of one of the most innocent yet incendiary kisses he had ever instigated. It would, he knew, take a significant amount of time for his tumescence to subside.

‘Just tell me how you think that will help and save my poor brain from over-exerting itself.’

‘Well obviously, you will pursue me and the assassin will seize the moment.’

‘Very reassuring,’ he replied, chuckling.

‘Your Mr Godfrey and any other servants you trust will be concealed, ready to disarm the assassin.’

‘I don’t think—’

A tap at the door had them sharing a concerned look. ‘Clio, are you still awake?’

‘That’s Adele.’ A hand flew to Clio’s flushed face and she looked more discomposed than he had ever seen her. She really didn’t want him to be caught here with her, and that realisation melted Ezra’s

heart. She was the only female beneath this roof who wouldn't take advantage of the situation. 'She will likely come in anyway. Quick, in the closet!' She gave him a hefty push in that direction.

'We will finish this conversation later,' he assured her as he disappeared behind the adjoining door, winking at her before he closed it.



Chapter Fourteen

Ezra concealed himself only seconds before Adele put her head round the door.

'Oh, you *are* still up. Good. I thought it was too early for you to be in bed.'

Adele sauntered into the room and took the same spot on the window seat that Ezra had just quit. Clio suspected it would still be warm and was astonished that her cousin couldn't smell the duke's distinctive masculine aroma lingering in the air. She seemed preoccupied though, and turned to Clio with an engaging smile.

'Yes, I was enjoying the peace and quiet.' A necessary falsehood on her part, Clio decided. 'I had no idea that house parties could be so exhausting.'

'You don't look exhausted.' Adele subjected Clio's face to exacting scrutiny. Botheration! Her eyes were probably glowing and her cheeks flushed, giving entirely the opposite impression to fatigue. 'Needless to say, everyone is talking about you.'

Clio rolled her eyes. 'I dare say.'

'Why did the duke dance with you? Not that there is any reason why he should not do so. In fact, he showed good judgement in singling you out. It's just that…well, no one has noticed him paying you any particular attention before now, and naturally they are all intrigued. I confess I am scarcely less so myself, but you disappeared before I could ask you about it. The duke did as well, as a matter of fact.'

'Did he?' Clio shrugged, convinced that Adele, who knew her so well, would see through her thin deception. 'Well, he didn't follow me in here, if that is what you are thinking.' Clio crossed her fingers in her lap to negate the lie. Not that it was a lie precisely. He hadn't followed *immediately* after her.

‘Of course I didn’t think that, silly.’

‘I don’t know why the duke danced with me,’ Clio said, because she had to say something. ‘We happened to be standing beside one another when the waltz struck up. I suppose he felt that he had to dance and I just happened to be there. I did notice Cora loitering close and we both have observed how blatantly she flaunts herself in front of him at every opportunity. I suppose I was the lesser of two evils.’

‘What was that noise?’ Adele asked, sitting upright and glaring at Clio’s dressing room door with suspicion.

‘What noise?’ Clio asked, knowing perfectly well. She had heard the duke attempting to stifle a laugh quite distinctly. ‘Probably someone moving about in the room next door. You know how sound travels in this old house.’

‘Well, whatever the duke’s reason, Cora looks upon you as the devil incarnate now. I heard her saying some quite spiteful things about you and took her to task for it.’

‘Thank you, dearest, but there is no need. Sticks and stones and all that. Besides, when the duke ignores me from this point on, speculation will soon die down.’

‘If he does. He seemed to laugh a great deal while you were dancing. Everyone agrees that they have never seen him look half so agreeable. He is fearfully handsome, don’t you think? All dark and brooding.’

Clio hesitated. Had Ezra not been hidden mere feet away, she would not have hesitated to agree but she was damned if she would stoke his quite disgustedly inflated pride by agreeing with Adele.

‘All dukes are regarded as handsome, even if they look like the back end of a horse,’ she replied. ‘But tell me how you got along with Lord Fryer this evening. Now *he* is a handsome man, and charming and polite and everything that a gentleman should be.’

Adele launched into a monologue, praising Lord Fryer’s attributes, and obviously didn’t hear the disgruntled sound that came from behind the dressing room door. Clio did and smiled.

‘Well, I am glad that his attentions appear constant, although I am not surprised,’ Clio said when Adele ran out of ways to express her admiration for the gentleman she had clearly fallen head over heels in love with. ‘Of course you are beyond compare to any previous attachments on his part.’

Adele’s pretty face glowed with happiness. ‘I will confess that I like him very much, but am determined to simply enjoy his attentions and let the future take care of itself.’

‘Very wise, my love. You will have ample opportunity to sneak away for a little walk with him at tomorrow’s al fresco luncheon.’

‘Mama is fretting about the weather. One of the gardeners warned her that there is rain in the air and now she is worried that it will interfere with her plans.’

‘It wouldn’t dare!’

‘Mr Conway is an oddity, is he not? I wonder why he danced if he cannot remember the steps. He trod on my toes and we only came together fleetingly in the quadrille. You must be near crippled. I told Mama that was likely why you came up—to get away from him, I mean.’

‘In actual fact I came up to get away from Captain Salford. The wretched man will not leave me alone or take no for an answer. His attentions are becoming tiresome.’

‘That is wrong of him, but I’m afraid Mama does encourage him to pursue you, with the kindest of intentions, naturally. As you know, she sees good in everyone, especially if they are handsome and charming, which the captain can be when he puts his mind to it. Well, he’s handsome all the time, I suppose. One cannot turn one’s appearance on and off in the same way that one can charm to order. Anyway, she is convinced that he has your best interests at heart and that you only require a little persuasion.’

‘She is quite wrong about that, but I do not hold my aunt to blame. Captain Salford should be gentlemanly enough to accept my refusal and be done with it. He is spoiling the pleasure that I would otherwise take from this party.’

‘Then I am sorry.’

‘Which will not prevent you from enjoying Lord Fryer’s smiles, and nor should it.’ When Adele yawned behind her hand, Clio gave her arm a gentle squeeze. ‘Take yourself off to your bed, my love, and make sure you get enough sleep. You must look your very best for Lord Fryer on the morrow.’

‘Yes, I think I shall. I am fatigued. Good night, dearest.’ The cousins embraced. ‘Get some rest yourself. I am glad you have decided against Captain Salford. For all his charm, there is something about him I find disagreeable.’ She tapped the fingers of one hand against her opposite forearm in a contemplative manner and frowned. ‘I could not say if pressed exactly what it is that deters me. Perhaps it is nothing more than my objecting to him spoiling your pleasures with his attentions. Anyway, you would be much better advised to cultivate the duke’s good opinion.’

‘Adele!’

Adele laughed. ‘I don’t care what protests you raise, I saw the way he looked at you when you danced and it was not the look of a man whose feelings are not invested. He most certainly didn’t dance with you just because you happened to be standing nearby, but if you would prefer not to tell me the truth then I shall not press the issue. You are entitled to your secrets. Good night, my love.’

And with that she was gone.

‘You can come out now,’ Clio said wearily, embarrassed by what he had overheard.

‘All dukes are regarded as handsome?’ He smirked as he threw her words back at her in the form of a question.

‘There are exceptions to every rule,’ she said, sending him an impertinent look that made him chuckle. ‘Now go! The party is breaking up and you will likely be seen leaving this room if you tarry much longer. Then tongues really will wag.’

‘It might be worth it,’ he said, ‘just to give the old biddies something to really talk about.’

‘The destruction of my reputation would be a source of amusement to you, your grace?’ she asked, tilting her head in a challenging fashion.

‘No, darling,’ he replied, chuckling, ‘but proving to them just what good judgement I have almost would be.’

He caught her around the waist, kissed her lips fleetingly—too fleetingly for Clio’s satisfaction—and left her room on silent feet.

Clio stared at the door he had closed behind him and returned to the window seat, aware that sleep would evade her and that the duke’s visit required a great deal of contemplation. The more time she spent with him, the more confused she felt. She had never known anything remotely like the exquisite shards of sensation that he could create in her body simply with a look, a gesture, an innocent touch of his hand. She was a fair way to falling in love with him, which was ridiculous. He had made it clear that he looked upon her as a child, not as someone to be taken seriously.

And yet…and yet he came to her room, kissed her, paid her compliments but hadn’t tried to seduce her. That showed both respect and restraint because Clio had probably made it clear to him in a dozen little ways that she would not be averse to the possibility of seduction. Perhaps it wasn’t seduction he had in mind, she reasoned. Perhaps he was playing upon her inexperience to make her think so, thereby diverting her thoughts from helping him. She knew that Lord

Fryer's attentions had made it impossible for Adele to think about anything other than seeing him again and the duke, having overheard their conversation, would be well aware of it.

'But I am not Adele,' she said aloud, thinking that she really ought to slip between the sheets and at least try to sleep if she didn't want to look an absolute fright the next day. She climbed into her bed and the last image to filter through her sub-conscious before sleep finally claimed her was of the duke's dark, intense gaze resting upon her profile in a profoundly sensual manner, as though noticing her, really noticing her as a woman rather than a child. It was a look that promised wicked pleasure, but he was too well disciplined, too conscious of his obligations to act upon his desires.

There was such a thing as being too gentlemanly, she thought as she thumped her pillows in frustration. He had no business kissing her, smiling at her in such a provocative manner, agitating her passions and then leaving her feeling frustrated and unfulfilled. What she wanted from him she could not have said. She worried that she had disappointed him by allowing him to…To what? He had come to her, after all. Had he expected her to scream the place down? Had his kisses been a test of some sort?

Perdition, all this speculation simply wouldn't do! She might be inexperienced, but her senses told her that Ezra really had come to talk to her, to make sure that Salford hadn't overset her, and not with ulterior motives in mind. So it followed that he had kissed her because he'd wanted to, or because he'd found the temptation too strong to resist. Clio chuckled at the thought of being a temptress. She wouldn't know where to begin. Even so, Ezra had stirred something deep inside of her, and now that it was awake the feelings refused to subside.

'There's no help for it,' she told her bed's canopy. 'Being an innocent is all well and good, but Ezra has piqued my interest so he has a duty to further my education.'

She smiled as she fell asleep, astonished by her daring. Even so, there was such a thing as priorities. Ezra would be no good to her if he wasn't alive, and it followed that she would have to help ensure that he remained so, regardless of his thoughts on the subject. All of her senses suggested that something would happen at the luncheon tomorrow and Clio had learned to trust her instincts.

'Tomorrow I shall be guarding him, whether he likes it or not,' she told her disinterested canopy. 'I now have a vested interest in keeping him safe.'



Mark Salford waited for the household to settle before making his way along the corridor to Isobel's chamber. An assignation that he would normally have anticipated with single-minded impatience had not been in the forefront of his mind for the entire evening, which came as something of a shock to him. Isobel was his *raison d'être.* Since first making her acquaintance, he had known she was the person he had been waiting for to make his life complete. His soulmate, lover and best friend.

She was a modern female, wild and liberated, which meant that they were a match made in heaven, and when they were apart Mark longed for her with every fibre of his being. Which is why he pretended not to mind her determination to attract the duke. One could not cage a free spirit. Mark could be patient when the occasion called for it. He would wait for Isobel to accept failure, at which point he would be there to pick up the pieces and salve her wounded pride. He could not ask her to become his wife as things stood, but as soon as Clio came to her senses he would be a man of substantial means. A man to be reckoned with.

A man who could grant Isobel her heart's desire.

Isobel's temporary infatuation with the duke was doomed to failure; that much Mark had always known. He understood the duke's fastidious character and was well aware that he would never entertain the prospect of a union with another man's widow.

Mark threw back his head and growled, thinking Wickham a blind fool, and wondering why he wasn't more relieved that he represented no form of competition for Isobel's affections. Perhaps because the blasted man looked down on Mark and had pretended to disapprove of his behaviour during the upheaval of war. The prospect of meeting one's maker caused all men to grab what they wanted while they still could.

All men other than the duke, who appeared to have a heart of stone.

Wickham's outrageous accusation of rape that threatened the reputation of the entire regiment still rankled. The woman might have been unwilling initially but she was simply being a tease, as women almost always were, and a little firm persuasion was all it had taken. Mark had never had to resort to rape in his entire life, even if it was a common enough occurrence during respites between battles. There was absolutely no need for Wickham to have made such a song and

dance about something so meaningless.

How was Mark supposed to have known that the lady he had favoured with his attentions was a relative of someone important in the town, or that she would cry crocodile tears in an effort to pretend that she had not been a willing participant? There was such a thing as camaraderie between officers and gentlemen, and regardless of his baseless suspicions, or what the hysterical female had claimed after an event she was happy to participate in, Wickham should have taken his side.

The two men had remained sworn enemies ever since.

And now, tonight, Mark's nemesis had deliberately singled Clio out for no other reason than to spite Mark, he was absolutely sure of it. Mark's anger still burned at the manner in which Wickham had held her scandalously close as he danced with her, thereby giving Lady Fletcher's guests a tantalising subject about which to gossip and speculate. Clio was too young to know any better, so Mark didn't blame her for following Wickham's lead. He had wanted to talk to her about it, felt it his duty to warn her of the dangers of a predatory man of the duke's ilk, but the opportunity had not arisen.

When he did manage to get her alone, Clio had the temerity to look down her pert little nose at him, making it clear that she would accept no advice from him before he even broached the subject. Mark had been in danger of self-combusting with anger. When his charm offensive missed its mark, he had been reduced to bringing her father's name into things, convinced that it would sway her thinking. She had always been dutiful; keen to impress her cold father even though he was no longer around to be impressed, and would comply with his wishes.

Eventually.

Except on this occasion, it hadn't worked. The duke had turned her head and Mark would have the devil of a job getting her to change her mind. Perhaps a little more of the firm persuasion he had employed in Spain would become necessary at the luncheon party tomorrow. Such occasions always allowed leeway for private discourse since the chaperones tended to overeat and then fall asleep.

Mark smiled to himself, aroused by the prospect of putting the presumptuous little jade firmly in her place. Once she had his ring on her finger she would regret the day that she had dallied with his affections or his name was not Mark Salford.

'There you are. I began to wonder.' Mark dragged his attention back to the here and now as he entered Isobel's room and found her draped on a chaise, ready to receive him, dressed in a diaphanous

nightgown that left little to the imagination and fired Mark's raging lust. 'I have been waiting an age.'

'I had to be sure that everyone was abed before joining you, my love. I am supposed to be pining for Clio's attentions, if you recall.' And, the devil take it, he actually was! But he knew he had said the wrong thing the moment she pouted.

'The hussy danced with the duke in such a flamboyant manner. Really, I do not know what her connections can be thinking of to allow her to flaunt herself so outrageously.'

'I rather think that the duke instigated matters, sweetheart. I don't suppose she knew any better.' Mark sat on the edge of the bed, pulled her into his arms and kissed her firmly. It was an effective way to put an end to any discussion about Clio, in which he seemed determined to defend her, even though he agreed with Isobel's views on the matter.

'Yes, but why?' she asked, the moment Mark broke the kiss. 'Such a mousy little thing, and the duke doesn't need her blunt. Why would he bother with her?'

'A useful way of discouraging the other little madams, one supposes,' Mark replied, effecting a casualness that he didn't feel. 'The duke would never marry the likes of her.'

Mark wondered if he was attempting to convince himself as much as Isobel. Clio was far too young to become a duchess. He dismissed from his mind the fact that he and the duke were about the same age and he saw no reason why Clio should not be married to him. Indeed, he could think of many reasons why she should be, not all of which had to do with her wealth, which was perplexing. He loved the voluptuous woman he was holding in his arms, didn't he? She would always be more than enough for him, which made his current mindset all that much harder to fathom.

He had seen the way Wickham had looked at the chit and had been worried by the raw passion reflected in his eyes. The duke, it seemed, had noticed the same individuality in Clio as she neared maturity that Mark had been both surprised and delighted to discover upon making her reacquaintance. The last time he had seen her she had been fourteen and unremarkable, but now it was a very different story. Whatever it was about her that both he and Wickham admired wasn't something one could put a name to, and would be impossible to explain to Isobel. Not that he had any intention of trying. The slightest signs of admiration on Mark's part would send her into a jealous rage.

'Liking the young and innocent does not equate to marriage and

happy ever after, my love,' he assured her, pushing her nightgown off her shoulders. 'They wouldn't have anything to talk about.'

'Talking was not what he had in mind when he held her so scandalously close, for all to see.' Isobel spoke through gritted teeth. 'Perhaps he knows that you want her and is singling her out just to annoy you.'

Very likely. 'It was a warning to the matchmakers not to interfere with his choice, I expect,' Mark said. 'He chose Clio because she has no male relatives here to protect her interests, and everyone knows that Lady Fletcher never sees any harm in anyone. How else did I wangle this invitation? You too, for that matter. You have not seen the lady for years and can hardly claim an intimate friendship, yet you didn't even have to drop any hints.'

Mark knew he had made a mistake in mentioning the passage of time when Isobel scowled at him.

'I shall find an opportunity during the excursion tomorrow to remind Wickham what an experienced woman has to offer. I depend upon you to keep the tiresome Miss Benton occupied.'

'I will do my humble best.'

Mark set about making love to her but his heart was no longer in it. As his passion exploded, it wasn't Isobel's face that he saw beneath him, contorted with pleasure, but Clio's. He wondered just how responsive she would be when the time finally came to surrender to him. With competition from Wickham, finding that answer had now become a matter of extreme expediency.

Ezra returned to his room to be greeted by Merlin's snores. The dog had curled up in the middle of Ezra's bed and didn't so much as twitch an ear when Ezra opened the door.

'Lazy mutt,' he said with affection, tugging one of the ears in question. 'I could have been killed for all the attention you pay to your duties.'

Merlin flapped his tail but kept his eyes firmly closed and Ezra laughed, envious of the dog's simple existence. He threw off his clothes and slid naked between the sheets, pushing Merlin to one side with his foot. The dog gave an indignant snort followed by a long-suffering sigh and allowed Ezra just a little more space.

‘How am I supposed to stop her from interfering and likely getting herself killed for her trouble?’ Ezra asked Merlin, lacing his hands behind his head and staring up at the bed’s canopy. ‘She’s thirsting for adventure and doesn’t seem to understand the seriousness of the situation in her desire to protect *me*. If things were not so dire then I would be touched by her determination.’

Merlin stood, turned in several tight circles and settled into a more comfortable position with a heavy thump.

‘It’s not as though she wants to make herself useful in order to impress me, incredulous though you doubtless find that idea.’ Merlin dreamed on, oblivious. ‘She doesn’t aspire to become my duchess, more’s the pity. She is far too young to assume such a role anyway. Why would I want to bring such a jewel into our fractured, loveless family, slowly stifling her spirit in the process? She deserves better. Much better. She certainly deserves to be presented and enjoy being feted before she settles down.’ Ezra frowned. ‘I don’t like the thought of fortune hunters flocking to her door and I wish there was someone more worldly than Lady Fletcher to protect her interests. But still, she can see Salford for what he is so perhaps she will not be blinded by the splendours of the *ton* in full swing, and with that thought I must force myself to be content.’

Merlin rolled onto his back and continued to snore, still entirely oblivious to the disjointed musings of a duke.

Ezra drifted into an uneasy sleep, interspersed with images of Clio’s flashing eyes and lively retorts. Recollections of the feel of her firm young lips beneath his caused him to groan. The possibility of her being killed in her stubborn determination to help him replaced desire with nightmares, from which he woke in a sweat of tangled sheets.

Ezra took Merlin for a ramble in the grounds as the sun struggled to appear from behind dark and threatening clouds. He glanced skywards, wondering if the elements would prevent the al fresco luncheon from going ahead. Part of him hoped that it would. He would have a better chance of keeping Clio safe and preventing her from acting impetuously if they did not leave the estate. But then again, he reasoned, bending to throw a stick for Merlin, staying here in safety would not draw the killer out.

If he were to leave the estate alone, it would give the assassin a perfect opportunity to do his worst. But not knowing when and where he intended to strike would give him an added advantage to the one which he already had, which was anonymity.

Ezra’s meander took him close to the stables, where all was activity, as was to be expected at such an early hour. He nodded to

Gibson, his groom and to Barnes, who cared for his mother's team, as they worked in adjoining stalls.

'Seems the luncheon is to go ahead, your grace,' Gibson remarked in response to Ezra's unasked question.

'Is Lady Fletcher up this early and making decisions?' Ezra asked, surprised. The ladies seldom appeared before noon.

'No, your grace. She left the decision to her butler, who has taken the view that the elements would not dare to rain on his mistress's entertainments.'

Ezra laughed and strolled away, thinking that resolved his problem. Clio would attend the luncheon and so would he. The decision was out of his hands. He would take Godfrey and Gibson with him, and Merlin too, for what use the cur was, and ensure that they stayed alert in their protection of him.

For his own part, Ezra had someone who was rapidly becoming a great deal more important to him to protect from her own folly, and despite the seriousness of the situation he found himself smiling as he returned to the house in search of breakfast. He was looking forward to the excursion enormously.



Chapter Fifteen

Clio woke early and thought at first that she must have dreamt the interlude with the duke the night before. It was too unreal to have any possible basis in fact. A half-dressed duke visiting a single female's bedchamber? She shook her head. He would have to have a death wish, she thought, laughing at the power of her imagination. But as alertness gradually pushed aside the fog of sleep from her brain she remembered every word, every look, every nuance with enough clarity to convince herself that the incident had actually happened.

'Quite extraordinary,' she muttered, shaking her head, wondering how she was supposed to feel about it in the cold light of day. Daisy appeared before she had time to decide.

'You're awake early, miss.' Daisy moved to the windows and pulled back the curtains. 'Excited about today's excursion, I dare say. There's dark skies but the luncheon is to go ahead, so Mr Godfrey tells me.'

'Well, I am sure that Mr Godfrey has got it right and the rain will have the good manners to hold off.'

'It's that busy below stairs, which is why I grabbed some hot water and came up right away, knowing that you're an early riser as a general rule. Would you like breakfast immediately?'

'I would, Daisy. You run and fetch it. I am perfectly capable of washing without your help.'

Clio wandered towards the ewer, into which Daisy had decanted the precious hot water that appeared to be in such short supply, and washed her hands and face. Standing at the window as she dried herself off, she glanced down and noticed Ezra striding back towards the house with Merlin at his heels. He looked so authoritative from her vantage point, so tall and sophisticated, yet so unapproachable. So far above her in the general order of things that he was completely beyond her reach. Certainly not the type of man to visit a female's

bedroom without seduction on his mind.

And yet he had behaved impeccably. Well almost, Clio conceded, recalling that kiss. Presumably he found her charms relatively easy to resist and really had only wanted to discuss Salford, against whom he bore a massive grudge.

With such sobering thoughts percolating through her mind, Clio did justice to her breakfast when Daisy returned with a tray. She listened with half an ear as her maid pottered about the room, preparing Clio's clothing for the day and chattering about the situation below stairs.

'Everyone is talking about the duke dancing with you, miss. Only Mr Godfrey and me didn't think there was anything odd about his choice.'

'That's a bit of a backhanded compliment, Daisy,' Clio said smiling, despite privately despairing because she had become the subject of such avid gossip, 'but I thank you for it nonetheless.' Clio suppressed a sigh, thinking it inevitable that the speculation would be just as rife below stairs as it would be in her aunt's drawing room.

'Her ladyship's butler doesn't allow anyone to gossip about their betters, but of course it happens anyway.' She giggled. 'One of the footmen is running a book, taking wagers on who will be the duke's choice of a bride.'

'That's vulgar, but I suppose servants enjoy a wager just as much as their masters,' Clio replied sighing. 'But I would advise against placing your hard-earned money on me, Daisy. The duke feels safe with me since he senses that I am not on the prowl for a husband. He had to dance at least one dance or appear impolite, so…' Clio spread her hands and allowed her words to trail off.

'That's not what Mr Godfrey says,' Daisy replied, clearly not convinced.

Clio wanted to pretend disinterest but couldn't prevent her head from swinging sharply around so that she could observe her maid. 'Whatever do you mean by that?' she asked, trying for a tone of casual indifference.

'He's been in the duke's service since long before he became the duke. He says that the ladies flocked to him in droves even when he was just Lord Ezra. Now the drove has turned into a stampede, and for that reason he's careful never to single anyone out.'

'I think your Mr Godfrey is reading too much into a single dance,' Clio said briskly, pushing aside her empty tray and draining the last of her coffee.

She dismissed Daisy as soon as she was dressed, tired of fending off questions that she couldn't answer truthfully, even if she had known for certain what the truth actually was. In the cold light of day, there didn't appear to be any justifiable reason for Ezra's visit to her chamber, and he had taken an almighty risk in making it. But for what purpose?

'I wish he wouldn't be so ambiguous,' she said on a note of ill-usage.

Dressed in a pretty walking gown of yellow sprigged muslin, Clio tried to decide what to do with herself. It was still relatively early, but she suspected that the ladies would be rousing themselves in preparation for the day's excursion and had no particular desire to be caught up with any of them, knowing full well that they would all ask her intrusive questions about her friendship with the duke. She smiled as she considered referring them to him for their answers. That would teach him to be so irresponsible!

A strong breeze was blowing, she could see when she glanced out at tree branches being bent back on themselves. But the rain was holding off, so she would take a stroll outside. Without bothering with a bonnet, Clio left the house and wandered towards the orchard, idly wondering if the stable yard cat had had her kittens yet. She couldn't go and investigate. There was far too much activity as the horses were being prepared for the day's outing, and she would be in the way.

She turned in another direction. Preoccupied and not looking where she was going, she almost collided with another person. A lady. She looked up to apologise but the words froze on her lips when she realised it was the dowager duchess.

'Miss Benton. I saw you from my chamber window.'

'Your grace.' Clio bobbed a curtsey. 'You are an early riser too?'

'Walk with me. I would like to talk to you.'

'With pleasure,' Clio replied, thinking it would likely be anything but a pleasurable experience. Her aunt spoke highly of the duchess, but all Clio saw was a haughty woman who seemed dissatisfied with her privileged position and who had neglected her sons, both living and dead. She was predisposed to dislike her but would keep an open mind, curious to know why she had gone to the trouble of occasioning this meeting. If she wanted to speak with Clio she could easily have summoned her and remained indoors out of the wind.

They turned together and took another path, away from the house and the prying eyes that were doubtless watching from behind many of the windows. Clio felt no need to instigate a conversation. The

duchess had something to say to her and Clio would let her broach it in her own time.

'My son danced with you last night,' she said eventually.

Clio confirmed it with the minimum of civility, expecting a barrage of objections and to be warned away from him with chastisements of getting ideas above her station.

'At last!' the duchess said, her words imbued with a wealth of satisfaction. Clio was so surprised that she abruptly stopped walking. 'Close your mouth, child, or you will catch flies.' Realising that her mouth had indeed been gaping open, Clio abruptly snapped it shut. 'You expected an interrogation?'

'I suppose I did,' Clio replied in a reasoned tone. 'I appreciate that we did not meet by accident. Indeed, you made that evident. My maid tells me that everyone below stairs is adding two and two and coming up with seventeen and I assumed that…well, that you had also, and would have objections to make.'

The duchess smiled. It was the first occasion upon which Clio had seen her do so and it made her seem almost approachable, the very opposite to the impression of an aloof, self-obsessed duchess that had formed in Clio's mind. 'My son came to this party with the intention of selecting a bride. He has left it for too long.'

'My understanding is that he hasn't been the duke for much more than a year, and had been in mourning for his father and then his brother,' Clio replied on a mild note of censure. She steeled herself for the reprimand that she probably deserved and was astonished when instead of voicing it, the duchess chuckled.

'My, but you are outspoken for one so young. What are you, no more than seventeen?' She grasped Clio's chin and peered into her face. 'And pretty but not too pretty. That's perfect.'

'I am not a horse,' Clio responded tartly, shaking her chin free of the duchess's fingers, 'so please don't ask to see my teeth since you can be sure that I shall very likely bite.'

This time the duchess laughed aloud. 'I can see why he is attracted to you,' she said. 'One tires of the flummery so easily.'

'And yet you enjoy the company of the worst offender.'

'Silas? Oh, he's harmless enough. He looks out for my interests, even though I am well aware why he does so. No one else ever has. Don't look so shocked. If you are to become part of this family you might as well learn some of our grubby secrets.' Clio wanted to protest, but the conversation was so interesting that she held her tongue. 'Ezra's father married me for my fortune, it was as simple as

that. I knew it, of course, but I wasn't much older than you are now and was convinced that I would persuade him to fall in love with me in short order.' She flapped a hand. 'Romantic claptrap, of course. The old duke didn't possess the capacity to love anyone other than himself. I don't think he even liked me very much, so love was never going to happen.'

'I'm sorry,' Clio said, meaning it. 'Everyone deserves to be loved for themselves.'

'Don't feel too sorry for me. We ladies are not often at liberty to please ourselves, and I wouldn't have been able to refuse him even if I had seen him for what he was before the event. My family was keen to forge the connection, as are the families of every young woman in attendance at this party.' She shook her head, clearly lost in past recollections. 'Oh no, refusing him was not an option. And so I involved myself with my children…'

Clio opened her mouth, convinced from what little Ezra had told her that it wasn't the case.

'You have heard, I suppose, that I am cold and unfeeling. Well, Miss Benton, if you had borne two daughters and a son, none of whom survived their infancies, you would have learned by that point to keep your feelings under closer guard, would you not?'

Clio nodded. 'I am so very sorry. I had no idea.'

'When the first of my three surviving sons developed recurring illnesses, he was still so very young. I couldn't allow myself to become attached to him or to the two who followed for fear that my heart would again be broken, and I honestly thought that it wouldn't survive another bereavement. My husband was no help whatsoever and told me to pull myself together. A lot of babies died, he insisted. It was the way of the world and it was to be expected.'

'That was most unkind of him.'

The duchess gave a sad little shake of her head. 'Believe me, you do not know the half of it. No one does. Not even Ezra.' She paused. 'Especially not him. Their father would not have permitted me to mollycoddle my sons anyway. He was a harsh man. They went off to school at the age of seven and I seldom saw them in the holidays. It was safer that way. I had been ill myself, weakened by grief I often thought. The doctors were baffled by the nature of my ailments, insisting that there was nothing physically wrong with me. They didn't seem to consider that ailments can afflict the mind and I didn't dare to make the suggestion. My husband would have had me shut away in a heartbeat.'

‘Goodness,’ Clio gasped.

‘Anyway, I knew that my heart couldn’t withstand another tragedy. By the time I realised that Richard and Ezra had grown into healthy, strapping young men we had become distant and it was too late for me to show them affection. Indeed, I had no idea how to. My husband had knocked all the spontaneity out of me.’

‘I can well imagine,’ Clio said, realising some sort of response was required from her. She was astonished that the haughty duchess was opening up to her in such a candid fashion when they were barely acquainted.

‘And then Richard died, so perhaps my instincts were right. I grieved in my own way, dignified and aloof, I have heard it said, and Ezra and I have never formed a bond. When he insisted upon fighting against that annoying little Frenchman, naturally I assumed the worst would happen and shut my emotions down. But he came back. He came back, I care very much about him, and about whomever he chooses as his duchess. I do not want to see the mistakes of past generations repeating themselves, but if my instincts are correct there is little chance of that happening.’ She stopped walking and fixed Clio with a probing look. ‘You are very young, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. I think you will do very well. It’s odd, but my eye was drawn to you even before I noticed Ezra’s interest, which perhaps implies a premonition of sorts.’

‘I am not the duke’s choice, your grace. Please don’t read more into one simple dance than perhaps you should.’

The duchess flashed a knowing smile. ‘We shall see, my dear.’ She laid a hand on Clio’s forearm. ‘Anyway, I had best return to the house. I have letters to write before we embark upon our excursion. I do hope the weather holds fair for us. It would be such a pity if it does not. I look forward to seeing you later. It has been a pleasure getting to know you and I hope we can talk again.’

‘The pleasure is all mine, your grace,’ Clio replied, bobbing a curtsey and watching the duchess walk away.

‘Do let me take you and your cousin in my carriage for the ride into Midhurst,’ she said, briefly turning back before resuming her walk. Naturally, she assumed that Clio would oblige her, which she would have to do, thereby adding to the speculation.

She continued wandering aimlessly, mulling the incident over. She had avoided the duchess’s company wherever possible up to that point, thinking her distant and unfeeling. Clearly it was unwise to make assumptions based on nothing more than an impression. Clio had just glimpsed an unhappy woman who had made a bad marriage

and suffered terrible tragedies. She had wanted to ask why she had not conducted a similar conversation with Ezra after her husband's death, but that would have been presumptuous.

And then it occurred to Clio that she had wanted to but didn't know how to bridge the divide that had grown between her and her only remaining child—a chasm of her own making. She stopped walking and shook her head, a reluctant smile gracing her lips.

'She wants me to break the ice between them, but that's impossible,' she said aloud, blushing at the mere prospect of instigating such an embarrassing conversation.

Hearing the stable yard clock strike the hour, Clio realised that she had been outside for longer than had been her intention. She scampered back in the direction of the house, aware that she must look a fright, having been out of doors in a fresh breeze without a bonnet. Daisy would have her work cut out to make her look presentable in the short amount of time that remained before they were due to leave on their excursion.



Ezra had correspondence to attend to that he had neglected for too long. He sat at the desk beside one of the windows in his suite of rooms and tried to concentrate on writing instructions for his steward. After several false starts he cursed, threw his pen aside, leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

Clio had a lot to answer for.

He glanced at the gardens below him and saw her wandering about, hatless of course, and apparently muttering to herself. The temptation to join her was compelling but he knew that dozens of pairs of eyes behind other windows in this large house would observe them and draw inappropriate conclusions.

Or perhaps appropriate ones.

Ezra couldn't afford to dwell upon his complex feelings for the chit when he had a more pressing need to ensure his own safety. Besides, if he continued to show Clio any partiality, she might become a target for the assassin too. In retrospect, perhaps waltzing with her had been an error of judgement. It had certainly got tongues wagging, according to Godfrey, but by all that was holy, he couldn't regret an interlude that had been so sublimely sensual!

‘Damn it all to hell!’ he cried in exasperation. ‘I shall walk with her if I want to. What’s the point of being a duke if I cannot sometimes please myself?’

Merlin roused himself from his slumbers and barked in agreement.

On the point of leaving his chamber with the intention of accidentally intercepting Clio, he paused when he noticed that she was no longer alone.

‘Damn!’ he muttered, thinking it was probably just as well that one of the other ladies had joined her before he could give in to temptation and do so himself.

About to return to his neglected correspondence, Clio and her companion turned back on the path they had just traversed and Ezra got a view of the other lady’s face.

‘Mother?’ He scratched his head. ‘It cannot possibly be. Why would she…Damn it, Merlin, she’s probably heard the rumours following that waltz—even though she was off enjoying herself and didn’t witness it first hand—and she’s now warning Clio off. How dare she!’

Angry enough to explode, Ezra wanted to thump something to rid himself of his growing frustration. He had always treated his mother with the respect due to a lady of her station, but they had never been on intimate terms, nor had they discussed his choice of a wife. Ezra supposed that attending this party was her way of giving tacit approval to Lady Beth. Perhaps Clio wasn’t well born enough to satisfy his mother’s exacting standards, but if she thought he would tolerate her interference then Ezra would be obliged to put her straight.

‘It’s a little late to show maternal interest in my affairs and I shall tell her so in no uncertain terms,’ he informed his dog.

‘Lady Walder ain’t done anything suspicious,’ Godfrey remarked, entering the room. ‘If you discount the fact that Salford snuck into her room after the party broke up last night.’

Ezra sent his man a sharp look. He hadn’t known that Godfrey had intended to keep watch over her inside this house. He hoped Lady Walder’s room was in a different corridor to Clio’s and that he had not been seen visiting her. For his own part, he couldn’t have cared less. He would do as he damned well pleased and answer to no one, but he would not have Clio’s reputation tarnished.

‘They are welcome to each other,’ Ezra said shortly.

Godfrey sent him a curious sideways glance as he prepared Ezra’s clothing for the outing, probably wondering why he was in such a foul temper.

A short time later, impeccably attired, Ezra went to the stables to collect Pharoah himself. He assumed that Clio would travel with her cousin in her aunt's carriage and wanted to ensure that she arrived at their destination unmolested. He should, he knew, have been considering his own safe passage, which was far less certain, but his priorities appeared to have changed.

Henry Fryer joined him, as did their respective servants, and the small party of mounted men rode to the front of the house, where six open carriages awaited the ladies, his mother's cream landau driven by Barnes prominent amongst them. They watched the ladies emerge from the house like a flight of colourful butterflies, chattering among themselves.

Ezra's mother climbed into her conveyance, followed by Adele Fletcher and…and Clio? Ezra almost tumbled from his saddle when he realised that his eyes had not deceived him.

'What the devil?' he muttered.

'Seems the mater has taken matters into her own hands,' Henry remarked, chuckling at Ezra's dismayed expression.

Ezra caught his mother's gaze and narrowed his eyes at her. It seemed that she approved of Clio after all, but was now inadvertently in danger of getting the chit killed. The duchess tilted her parasol over one shoulder, waggled her fingers at Ezra and instructed Barnes to drive on.

Barnes whipped up his team, and with a sigh Ezra knew he had no option but to ride alongside.



Chapter Sixteen

Clio felt as though the eyes of every member of the party were fixed upon her and cursed her inability to hold back the blushes, even though no one other than Adele and the duchess were close enough to observe them. Adele had been full of questions when Clio told her they had been invited to travel with the duchess, and had jumped to the same erroneous conclusions as everyone else appeared to have done. The desire to hide her face behind her parasol was compelling, but Clio would not have the world judge her as a simpering nincompoop and so instead tilted it over her shoulder at a jaunty angle and pretended not to have a care in the world.

Ezra and Lord Fryer rode close beside their conveyance, adding fuel to the raging fires of speculation. Fortunately, Adele was unable to question Clio in front of the duchess—and anyway, with Lord Fryer in such close attendance she had other priorities. The duke's expression was dark and forbidding. Clio suspected that he wasn't happy about her sudden association with his lady mother. God forbid that he thought she had instigated it, using the rumours the waltz had created to feather her own nest. She felt hot and cold all over as a thought that more than justified his dour mood took a firm hold. Surely he knew her better than to assume she would take such shameful advantage. He would hardly have come to her room if he believed that she would attempt to manipulate him and felt her own annoyance surfacing at his narrow-minded assumption.

She had intended to avoid him during the course of the luncheon and instead keep a weather eye out for assassins. Instead, she would now be obliged to actively seek him out and put him straight on the matter, further adding to the general speculation if they were seen together.

Clio smiled when they reached their destination, momentarily distracted from her concerns. Lady Fletcher's idea of an al fresco

luncheon, a glorified picnic, involved an arrangement of long trestle tables that must have been brought up from her estate at first light. They were set with crisp white linen and a small army of uniformed footmen were busy laying out china and crystal glasses. The only concession to the picnic theme that Clio could see was a table groaning beneath the weight of the food that had been laid out on it, from which the guests must make the effort to help themselves.

There was a whole pig roasting on a spit, Clio noticed, and a bewildering array of cold meats and tempting puddings already on display. Various games had been set up around the clearing that could have been arranged with far less effort on the part of Lady Fletcher's servants in the gardens of Windgates. The only advantage to this location, Clio decided, was the magnificent view of the surrounding countryside and the nearby village from their vantage point on high ground. That view was impeded today by low clouds and only spasmodic sunshine, but if rain was in the offing no one seemed to mind. There was a carnival atmosphere which allowed the guests to feel they were being granted a temporary respite that they fully intended to exploit.

Which was what concerned Clio. Even though she was annoyed with Ezra for jumping to conclusions, she was still worried that the assassin would seize his opportunity in such a situation. She glanced around, seeing a dozen different places at a glance where a man could hide and wait for that opportunity to present itself. She noticed Merlin, nose pressed to the ground, scouting out some of the trees in question and using them as watering posts. She felt a little less concerned now that she had seen the dog doing his patrols. With great good fortune, his presence would prevent any intruder getting too close.

'Some picnic,' she muttered, walking with Adele towards some vacant seats and watching the rest of the guests mingling. The duchess had gone in another direction and Clio noticed her in heated conversation with Ezra.

'Let's get something to eat before a queue forms,' Adele suggested.

Clio had no appetite, but agreed readily enough. If they were surrounded by other people, it would prevent Adele from asking the questions that Clio knew she must be burning to voice.

'More to the point, once the irksome business of eating is out of the way, it will give you more time to spend with Lord Fryer,' Clio teased, squeezing her cousin's arm as they took the plates handed to them by footmen and worked their way along the table, helping themselves to modest servings of their favourite delicacies.

Others joined them at the long tables, but Ezra wasn't amongst their number. In fact, she couldn't see him or Merlin anywhere, but Mr Godfrey was lurking on the periphery and Clio had to believe that he would not let his master out of his sight.

Once the meal was out of the way, everyone got up and wandered about, the bolder young ladies taking the opportunity to stroll away from their chaperones, most of whom appeared to be fighting postprandial somnolence. Adele had excused herself and disappeared on Lord Fryer's arm. In spite of her graver concerns, Clio took a moment to celebrate the fact that the attractive viscount's interest in her cousin didn't appear to be waning. At least something had gone right for one of them.

No one appeared to pay Clio any particular attention, presumably because the duke hadn't come anywhere near her. They would be congratulating themselves upon having surmised that such a sophisticated gentleman couldn't possibly have an abiding interest in someone of such lowly stature. One or two of the young ladies sent her supercilious looks as she passed them, taking pleasure from the fact that she had been put firmly back in her place. She actually overheard someone suggest that the duchess had deliberately taken her up in her carriage so that she could warn her off the duke.

Shaking her head at the ridiculousness of society's petty jealousies, she wandered off alone wondering whether she really wanted to put herself through a season if this was the type of treatment she had to look forward to. There was no substance to this party, the conversation amongst the ladies appeared to focus almost exclusively upon matrimony and gossip, and she was bored. Or she would have been but for the fact that she had an ungrateful duke to keep alive, she reminded herself.

About to seek him out, she almost literally bumped straight into him. He put out a hand to steady her and when she looked up into his face she blanched at the ferocity of his expression.

'You should not have left the main party,' he scolded. 'It isn't safe.'

'I was looking for you. I wanted to make sure you were not being used for target practice—precious little thanks I get for it.'

His expression softened. 'I am sorry my mother took you up,' he said.

'It gave the wrong impression, I am well aware of that, and I dare say you are cross about it, but I couldn't refuse her.' Clio tossed her head, thinking it vital that he understood her predicament. 'It would have been impolite.'

‘Indeed.’ Ezra raised one brow in evident surprise. ‘She did not discourage you?’ he asked.

She sent him an innocent smile from beneath the brim of her hat. ‘Discourage me from what?’ She bent to make a fuss of Merlin, who had come running up to them, his tail spiralling.

‘Minx!’ The anger left his eyes. ‘You know very well.’

‘I know that tongues are wagging for no good reason, which is tiresome. It is not as if I can tell anyone the truth about the reason for our collaboration.’

‘Our collaboration?’ He looked amused as he turned a laugh into a cough.

‘Your lady mother has the wrong idea too. I like her very much, by the way, which I will confess comes as a surprise. Your father, she tells me, was not an easy man and he showed little or no affection.’

‘She actually admitted that to you?’ Ezra ground his jaw, not waiting for a response. ‘It’s the truth but not the sort of thing that one would ordinarily tell a stranger.’ Speculation filtered across his features, culminating in a smile. ‘I am surprised she cared about the pater’s behaviour, or took any notice of it, come to that. She always seemed to be too busy with her own affairs and totally self-sufficient. Too busy for her own children.’

Clio wanted to explain why she had cut herself off from them but decided it wasn’t her place to do so. Ezra and the duchess must work things out between themselves.

‘Any sign of the assassin?’ she asked. ‘Not that you would know, of course. I dare say he either hides himself away or, if he is one of our party then he blends in. I noticed Merlin checking out likely hiding places earlier.’ She chuckled. ‘I hope he ruined the assassin’s boots.’

‘I have several men posted and keeping their eyes open as well as this lazy mutt.’ Ezra tugged at one of Merlin’s ears, sending the dog into a state of near delirium. ‘Even so, I shouldn’t stay with you.’

‘Oh, don’t worry.’ Clio gave her head another lofty toss. ‘The gossips will soon tire of their sport when they realise that I have not developed ideas above my station.’

‘Foolish child! I hadn’t given the tattle a second thought and no more should you.’

‘*Your* reputation will not suffer. In fact, the gossip will likely enhance it, whereas mine will soon be beyond redemption.’ She glanced at a growing number of people who had found reasons to stroll close to them, too close, and linger. ‘Really, it is most unfair!’

Ezra laughed. ‘Go and join in the games. They are bobbing for apples by the looks of things. A ridiculous game but at least you’ll be unlikely to suffer any fate worse than a ducking.’

‘Do you always tell people what to do?’

‘Almost always.’ He flashed a self-deprecating smile. ‘I can’t seem to help myself.’

‘I know that you think of me as an adolescent, but it does not necessarily follow that I enjoy adolescent pursuits and I don’t have the least intention of ruining my new bonnet by risking the ducking you seem to think I deserve.’

His eyes flashed with an unholy light. ‘Let me put you right on that point. I think of you a great deal but never as an adolescent, and therein lies my difficulty.’

‘You are talking in riddles again,’ Clio replied impatiently, ‘and I am not nearly clever enough to understand you, so I shall not attempt it. Where is your Lady Walder? I have hardly seen her or Salford this afternoon.’

‘She is not mine and I venture to suggest that they have gone off somewhere together.’

‘Well then, either they intend to do away with you between them or they are not the ones trying to kill you.’

Ezra tilted his head and grinned. ‘Very astute.’

‘I am at my wits’ end attempting to keep you alive and all you can do is laugh at me!’ she cried.

‘Go and join your aunt, my sweet. If anyone does attempt to kill me—’

‘You are making it very easy for them by wandering about away from the rest of the party,’ she scolded.

‘That is rather the point. But don’t worry, we are not alone.’

‘Very reassuring.’

‘I am almost certain that we will be able to foil any attack, but just in case we do not, I don’t want you caught in the crossfire.’

She could see from the dark intensity of his gaze that his concern was entirely for her. Her heart melted and she stopped fighting the attraction, admitting to herself that she was violently in love with this noble if annoyingly dictatorial aristocrat. One-sided love affairs were destined to fail, obviously, and Clio’s pride would ensure that she took her secret to her grave. Not even Adele would wheedle it out of her.

A loud peal of laughter came from the area where the games were

taking place. Lord Fryer grinned good-naturedly as he shook water from his hair. Clearly, the apple bobbing had defeated him.

'Go and join them,' Ezra said, making shooing motions with his hands. 'I will be there myself directly.'

'Very well, but take care. Your mother will not survive the loss of another child.'

'Glad to know that you have my mother's interests at heart,' he replied in an amused tone.

'What other reason could I possibly have to care about your survival?' Clio asked, sauntering away.

Feeling uneasy about the situation but having no choice but to leave Ezra to present himself as a target, Clio joined the others clustered around the apple bobbing but couldn't get into the spirit of things. Her cousins were both taken up with their escorts, there was no sign of the duchess or of her carriage either and Clio supposed she had taken the opportunity to call upon Lord Brennan. She genuinely hoped that the unhappy lady was enjoying a few hours of pleasure.

A loud clap of thunder directly overhead elicited a collective groan. The first heavy raindrops fell without warning, soaking through delicate muslins and straw bonnets. There was an unseemly scramble to reach the carriages, where hoods were being hastily put up by a squadron of grooms.

Clio looked for Ezra, who had been accosted by Lady Walder. Salford was not with her, which caused Clio to wonder. Had Lady Walder distracted Ezra to prevent him from returning to his horse, thereby giving Salford an ideal opportunity to fire a deadly shot while pandemonium reigned? No one would hear a pistol being discharged above the noise of the storm. But then again, being killed by a pistol could not be written off as an accident and all hell would break loose in pursuit of the perpetrator. If Ezra was right then the assassin had gone to considerable lengths to make his previous handiwork appear accidental and had thus far avoided detection as a consequence.

Feeling a little reassured on that score, Clio was still very suspicious of Lady Walder and didn't like the thought of her clinging to Ezra. Even so, there was nothing she could do to separate them. He would not thank her for her intervention, so she would be better advised to consider how best to get back to the house. Hopefully there would be seats in other carriages for her and Adele, given that the duchess was still absent.

She glared one last time at Ezra, doing her damnedest to communicate her fears to him, but he didn't once look in her direction

and continued a heated discussion with Lady Walder instead. Now soaked to the skin, Clio fervently hoped that Mr Godfrey and whoever else Ezra had posted would be keeping him in their sights. There was nothing more that she could do to help him and if she lingered, then she could well distract him, with deadly consequences. The best, indeed the only thing she could do now to help him was to return to the house and wait to hear that he had also got back unharmed.

The wait would, she knew, be long and anxious.

Not paying attention to her footing, she slipped on a muddy patch and a strong arm grabbed her around the waist to prevent her from taking a tumble. Before she could thank her saviour, a sack was pulled over her head. Fear swept through her. This couldn't be right. No one had any reason to abduct her. It had to be a silly joke. Despite the storm, everyone seemed to be in high spirits still. This was just an extension of the games. Someone was getting their revenge because she'd refused to bob for apples, claiming that she feared for her bonnet.

A bonnet that must have fallen from her head when the man grabbed her, she assumed, since her hair was now falling over her face and tickling her nose beneath the horrible sacking.

Clio's mind cleared and she knew it was no joke. No gentleman would manhandle a single lady, or any lady at all, in such a brutish and familiar fashion. Fear and desperation lent her superhuman strength and she kicked wildly at her abductor's shins. He responded with a string of oaths as he tightened his hold on her.

'Stop struggling,' he said gruffly, 'or it will be the worse for you.'

Clio never had been good at obeying orders and kicked backwards, trying her damnedest to make contact with the man's genitals. He groaned and momentarily released his hold on her, implying that she had found her target. Clio screamed at the top of her voice and tried to run. But her voice was drowned out by thunder as it cracked directly above their heads. The man again caught her and delivered a swift clout to the side of her head. Clio saw stars as pain shot through her temple and the fight drained out of her. She was vaguely aware of being swept from the ground and thrown over a shoulder.

That was all she recalled before she lost consciousness.



Chapter Seventeen

Ezra was grateful when the storm broke. Lady Walder had latched onto him but would now have to run for the cover of the carriages or risk a soaking. He was also well aware that in all the confusion it would be the perfect time for the assassin to strike. Merlin stood close at his heels, growling and cowering simultaneously, frightened of the storm but still determined to protect Ezra. In that regard, he didn't seem too impressed by Lady Walder and his growls were directed towards her, albeit from behind the protection of Ezra's legs.

'You must leave here,' Ezra said, turning towards the tethered horses. Most were already gone, as were the majority of carriages. Pharaoh shuffled uneasily on the end of his lead rope, frightened by the thunder too. 'Your delay is holding up the last of the carriages and its occupants will be getting wet.' He nodded towards the only remaining conveyance, which contained an agitated Lady Fletcher. 'A word to the wise, madam,' he added *sotto voce,* 'do not embarrass yourself by attempting to attract me, since it will not serve.'

She turned to look at him, openly shocked. 'Clearly you misconstrue. We must continue this conversation later, in private, and iron out the unfortunate misunderstanding.'

'I think not,' Ezra replied, forgoing the remnants of civility. If she was willing to be so brazen then he would ensure that his intentions were not misconstrued. 'Enjoy Salford. You deserve one another.'

Ezra left her with her mouth hanging open and strode away, vaguely conscious of Lady Fletcher's voice urging her to get into the carriage and out of the rain.

'Anything?' Ezra asked as he swung into Pharaoh's damp saddle and took up the reins. The horse immediately became less skittish with Ezra on his back, or perhaps because the storm was already

abating.

‘Quiet as the grave,’ Godfrey replied, mounting his own horse. ‘At least insofar as those with murderous intent are concerned. Didn’t see a thing out of place. Perhaps we have got it wrong, guv’nor?’

‘Possibly.’ Ezra spurred Pharoah into a trot, mindless of the wet mud that flew up from his hooves. Merlin raced alongside them, splattered from head to foot. ‘But my instincts tell me otherwise.’

‘Right, well, if your instincts are what we’re using as a yardstick…’

They didn’t speak again until they had returned to the house and the privacy of Ezra’s rooms. Ezra threw off his mud-splattered clothing and made use of the hot water that Godfrey produced.

‘Fetch me something to eat, would you?’ Ezra asked, lifting his head and shaking droplets of water from his hair. It made him smile when it brought to mind Clio’s disinclination for ruining her bonnet by bobbing for apples. ‘I didn’t get the chance to eat at the luncheon.’

Godfrey nodded and disappeared. He returned again with such speed that Ezra knew immediately that something was seriously wrong.

‘What is it?’ he asked sharply.

‘It’s Miss Benton.’

‘What about her?’ Ezra barked.

‘She didn’t come back from the luncheon.’

Ezra’s heart plummeted. ‘What do you mean, she didn’t come back? Of course she must have.’ But he knew from the stricken state of Godfrey’s features that she had somehow been left behind. ‘What in the world could have happened to her? She travelled there with my mother and so…’

Without bothering to complete his sentence, Ezra pulled a clean shirt over his head and left the room with Merlin at his heels, whimpering in sympathy with Ezra’s growing concern. His mother had the chamber across the corridor from his and Ezra gave the door a perfunctory tap before letting himself in.

‘Ezra!’ The duchess was reclined on a chaise beneath the window but half rose from it to fix Ezra with a look of mild surprise. ‘What a pleasant surprise.’

‘Did Miss Benton return to the house in your carriage?’ Ezra asked without preamble.

‘What?’

‘It’s a simple enough question.’ Ezra sucked in a sharp, nervous

breath. If something had happened to her then time was of the essence and he couldn't afford to waste a moment of it. 'You took her up on the outward journey so presumably you remembered to bring her back with you.'

'Well, no…That is to say, I…'

'You what, Mother?' Ezra asked, his voice hardening.

'There was so much confusion, I couldn't find her so I just assumed that she had returned with someone else.'

Ezra was so angry that red spots threatened to blur his vision. Something bad had happened to Clio, his every instinct told him so. He looked away from his mother as he struggled to control his rage. Angry people did not think coherently. His gaze roamed around the room, alighting upon his mother's bed and the yellow embroidered reticule laying on it. The breath left his body in an extravagant whoosh.

'That belongs to Miss Benton.'

His mother nodded. 'Indeed it does. She left it in my carriage. I will have my maid return it to her.'

'No.' Ezra slowly shook his head. 'She had it with her when I spoke to her at the luncheon. If she did not return with you then how did it come to be in your carriage?'

'How should I know?' The duchess lifted a slim shoulder in evident disinterest. 'Why not ask her if such a trifling matter is so important to you. There has obviously been a silly mistake and I fail to understand why you are getting into such a taking about it.'

'I cannot ask her, Mother, for the simple reason that she isn't here. She hasn't come back.'

'Hasn't come back?' His mother looked momentarily alarmed but then flapped a hand in casual dismissal of Ezra's concerns. 'Don't be ridiculous. She must have. Even if she was somehow left behind in all the confusion, Lady Fletcher's servants will be there clearing away. They will ensure her safe return.'

'I was the last to leave. There were no ladies left behind at that point.'

His mother's expression turned evasive, causing Ezra to belatedly realise that he hadn't seen her at all since very early after her arrival when they had briefly spoken to one another. He recalled as well that Brennan lived close by.

'You weren't there, were you?' he said slowly, his seething anger on the point of erupting. 'That's why she couldn't come back with you.

You were with Brennan.'

'So what if I was?' she asked defensively. 'No one will have missed me.'

'Except Miss Benton, who thanks to your neglect might well now be in peril.'

'I like Miss Benton and I am sorry this has happened, but really, who would want to harm her?'

Ezra was momentarily tempted to explain, but there was no time. Instead, his mind reeled with increasingly unpalatable possibilities. A tap at the door preceded Godfrey putting his head round it.

'This was just hand delivered,' he said, passing Ezra a sealed note. 'Thought it might be important.'

Ezra crossed to his mother's writing desk, picked up a paper knife and broke the seal. He read the contents once and swore viciously.

'What is it?' the duchess asked.

He passed the note to Godfrey. 'Someone has taken Miss Benton, and they want me in place of her,' he said through gritted teeth.

'Out of the question!' the duchess cried with surprising emotion. 'You are all I have left.'

'You expect me to let a young woman die and do nothing to prevent it?' He waved a hand to prevent his mother from speaking again. 'Hush, I need to think.'

Ezra paced the length of the room, rubbing his chin as he attempted to decide who had taken her. His dancing with her, followed by his mother's public display of approval had clearly made her a target. Ergo, this was all his fault and a situation that he must somehow rectify. But where to start looking?

'Barnes drove you to Brennan?' he asked.

'Yes, and waited for me.'

'How long were you there?'

'Oh, I'm not sure, perhaps two hours. I left just as the storm broke.'

Ezra nodded, recalling that the weather deteriorated a good two hours after their arrival at Midhurst.

'Very well. Say nothing about this, Mother. I will deal with it.'

The duchess stood and looked resolute. 'No! I cannot lose another son.' Ezra was astonished when tears began to stream down her cheeks. Please, Ezra.' She grasped his arm. 'See reason. You are too important to the future of the duchy. Let others take the risks.'

‘If you wish to make amends for your neglect, oblige me by remaining silent about Miss Benton’s disappearance. If questions are asked, say she came back with you.’ He softened his tone, wondering if Clio had been right and that his mother did have feelings. It was the first time she had shown any sign of emotion in front of him, but still… ‘This will be resolved within a few hours, one way or the other.’

Having extracted a reluctant promise from the duchess, Ezra and Godfrey left the room and returned to their own.

‘What are your thoughts?’ Godfrey asked.

‘This has to do with Barnes. I wish I knew how, but the fact remains that Clio had this with her when we spoke,’ Ezra replied, glancing at the reticule he still held in his hands. ‘I remember her fiddling with the handle, which is how it caught my notice. She cannot have left it in my mother’s carriage and so…’

‘And so it must have been deposited there after she was abducted.’

‘Precisely.’ Ezra flexed a jaw so rigid with tension that he was surprised the gesture didn’t cause it to snap. ‘And the fact that her abductor wants me to meet him alone behind the stables in two hours confirms Barnes’s involvement. What do we know about him, other than that he’s a favourite of my mother’s?’

‘Your father employed him when we were away fighting Boney. Not sure how he came to be in your mother’s exclusive service. He’s a good looking dog who makes himself agreeable to the ladies, as well as being a decent driver with an instinct for horses. I reckon he used his charm on your lady mother, because she won’t hear a word against him.’

‘Is he our assassin?’

‘Could be. No one would suspect a humble groom.’ Godfrey frowned. ‘But why?’

‘That is what I have been asking myself. Mother said he waited for her when she visited Brennan, but I don’t suppose she looked out of the window every five minutes to make sure he was still there.’

‘But Miss Benton was at the luncheon, right up until the storm broke. I saw her myself. Barnes would have been pushed to abduct her and get back to Midhurst in time to collect her grace, who maintains she left when the storm broke.’

‘She would not have left until it cleared. No one with any sense would deliberately set out in such weather, and I suspect she would have welcomed the excuse to linger with Brennan. By the time the weather had improved, Barnes would have been back and Mother none the wiser.’

‘Where would Miss Benton have been kept?’

‘In the carriage’s trunk,’ Ezra said scowling. ‘Tied and gagged to keep her quiet, one assumes. However, she would not have been heard above the noise of the horses’ hooves even if she did manage to kick at the carriage’s bodywork and cause a ruckus. It was risky but possible for a man with enough determination.’

Godfrey nodded. ‘What a scoundrel, picking on a harmless female in order to get to you. The worst sort of despicable coward.’

‘Quite, but we are now one step ahead of him. I’m confident that he won’t have killed her—at least not yet. He might be waiting to do so in front of me, but one thing’s for sure, she will not be permitted to live once Barnes has confronted me, so we shall just have to find her before I have the pleasure of kicking him like the dog that he is. Except I would never kick a dog,’ he added, reaching down to scratch Merlin’s ears. ‘They at least understand the meaning of loyalty. Anyway, whereabouts on this estate would the blaggard take her in order to be assured of privacy?’

‘There are too many grooms for them all to fit into the accommodation above the stables, so the senior retainers have been given rooms in the vacant cottages a half mile from the stables.’

A grim smile spread across Ezra’s face. ‘Well then, this mutt had best earn his keep.’ Ezra whistled to Merlin, who roused himself, wagged his tail and sniffed at the reticule that Ezra had kept hold of. ‘Go find her, boy!’

‘We will all find her, your grace,’ Godfrey said in a firm tone as he pulled a pair of duelling pistols from a case and ensured that they were both primed. ‘You can’t do this alone. Quite apart from anything else, I’m too old to find another position.’



Clio opened her eyes, feeling groggy and disorientated. Her hands and feet were tied, her mouth tightly gagged, and she felt cold, desperately cold. She struggled to recall how she had finished up in this farrago. It came back to her in fragments. Being accosted, fighting, trying to escape, the storm, getting soaked to the skin, being hit with considerable force. Her head thumped at the recollection. She laid back on a bed of some sort and waited for the dizziness to pass.

There had been a carriage ride, she remembered, but she must have been bundled into the trunk while still unconscious. She had

been terrified when she regained consciousness in the total darkness of such a confined space and had passed out once again.

Now, here she found herself in this damp hovel; little more than a shed, as far as she could make out in the dim interior. She knew who her captor must be, much good that knowledge was likely to do her in her current predicament. She had recognised his voice as that of the duchess's driver, Barnes.

The duchess!

Was she responsible for Clio's abduction? Had she pretended to befriend her in order to win her trust, only to have her wiped out in the cruellest of fashions in order to prevent Ezra from making what she would undoubtedly look upon as a *mésalliance*? Clio shook her head, her squeal of pain that the gesture occasioned covered by her gag which allowed for almost no sound to escape from her mouth. If the duchess wanted her out of the way, there were surely much easier ways to go about it. She only had to make her disapproval of Ezra's supposed interest in her apparent and anyone who mattered would have cut her out of a sense of loyalty, or more likely because they would prefer their own charges to make an impression upon the handsome duke.

But Ezra took little notice of his mother's wishes and the lady knew it, so why go to such lengths—and worse, why involve someone else in her machinations, leaving herself open to blackmail and betrayal?

It made absolutely no sense.

Barnes must be working alone, there was no other explanation. He was systematically killing off Ezra's family for reasons that had yet to become apparent, and was using her to get to Ezra. Which meant that neither of them would be permitted to live.

Despite her debilitated state, Clio felt fresh determination to get the better of her vile captor. And to do that she would need to escape. The storm had been both a hinderance and a help, Clio reasoned. She had seen the duchess leave the luncheon in her carriage not long after their arrival, which meant she had been right to assume she would call upon Lord Brennan and enjoy the entire afternoon in his company. She would not have kept check on her faithful coachman, who had returned with the intention of…

Of what precisely? Had she always been his target, bait to tempt Ezra into a trap, or had he improvised when the storm hit? The man was brazen and unscrupulous, but Clio would best him or die trying. She shuddered when she considered that the latter outcome was more likely since he currently held all the aces.

But he was not in love, as far as she knew, and did not have a compelling reason to ensure that the object of his affections remained alive.

Resolved to protect Ezra, Clio swung her bound legs until she could manoeuvre her feet onto the floor and then used her elbow to push herself into a sitting position. The room swam in front of her eyes as a result of that small effort, which was not encouraging. She took stock of her surroundings and discovered that she was in a small shed of some sort. The bed she had been resting on took up at least half of the limited space. There was one window high up in the wall, against which rain pattered, and a door that was almost certainly locked from the outside. Her hands were bound behind her but Clio lifted her legs and bottom and managed to bring them to the front.

From there she awkwardly fumbled with the knots that secured the rope around her ankles, which had been rubbed red raw by the rough hemp. It seemed to take an age and she kept having to rest and allow time for her muddled head to clear, but eventually she managed to free one leg, then the other. Euphoric at this small act of defiance, she stamped her feet to restore feeling to them and wondered what to do next. If Barnes came back, she was too weak to run away and knew that if she tried it he would likely kill her.

The gag tasted rancid and made it hard for her to breathe. She lowered her head into her lap and painfully pulled thick locks of hair free from the back of the gag where it had been tied around her head, her bound hands making the task awkward. She loosened it enough to flex her jaw until it slipped away from her mouth, enabling her to gulp down greedy breaths until the pain in her chest eased.

Then she heard footsteps approaching and her heart quailed.

‘So close,’ she muttered, desperately looking for a hiding place. But the room was too small; there was nowhere for her to conceal herself.

She heard voices. Not two people, please! The door flew inwards with a loud crash. Clio grabbed the first thing that came to hand, a china chamber pot, and raised it awkwardly above her head in her bound hands. If she had to die, she was damned if she would do so passively.

‘Argh!’ she screamed as the first body tumbled through the door. But before she could crack him over the head with her weapon, a steady hand took it from her. Clio, deflated and defeated, sagged against the wall. Then a cold nose pushed its way beneath her hand and a familiar aroma assailed her nostrils.

‘Ezra?’ She stared up at him in disbelief for a moment, thinking

her addled mind must still be playing tricks on her, then fell against his chest, at which point his strong arms closed around her.

'Hush,' he said, kissing the top of her head. 'You gave me quite a fright, but you're safe now. Are you harmed?'

'No,' she said, her voice catching in her throat. 'But I was so very afraid.' She gulped. 'And alone, and helpless.'

Then she burst into tears and sobbed her heart out against his shoulder.



Ezra untied Clio's hands, draped a blanket around her shoulders, swept her into his arms and carried her from the shack that Merlin had led them to. It was not the accommodation that Barnes had been allocated but he must have seen the disused shed during the course of his duties and singled it out as an ideal place to hold a captive if the need arose. Without Merlin's trustworthy nose, Ezra would have overlooked it completely.

'We need to get her to her room without anyone seeing her like this,' Ezra said.

'Follow me,' Godfrey replied, leading the way to a servants' staircase directly off the boot room. 'No one will be using this route at this hour of the day.'

Merlin and Godfrey led the way, with Ezra carrying Clio cradled in his arms. One of her arms had worked its way around his neck and she seemed disturbingly passive, which was not like her at all. Then Ezra reminded himself of the ordeal she had endured. Most women in such a situation would have been reduced to hysterics. He smiled down at her, thanking a God that he was unsure he believed in for her safe deliverance. Retribution would be his and it would be swift and brutal.

'Were you really going to clout me with a chamber pot?' he asked, when her tears had soaked his shirt and her snuffling subsided.

'I certainly was,' she replied with asperity. 'Although I was not aware that it was you. I thought…I thought he was going to…'

'At least it wasn't full. Hush now, my sweet.' Ezra rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. 'I am so very sorry that I got you into this.'

'But it was—'

‘I know who it was, but not why. Yet.’ The door opened onto the main first floor corridor. Godfrey put his head round it.

‘It’s clear,’ he said.

Ezra strode along it and Godfrey ran ahead to open the door to Clio’s chamber. Her maid was pacing up and down and gave a little cry of alarm when she observed her half-conscious mistress cradled in Ezra’s arms.

‘Oh my good lord!’ She placed a hand over her mouth. ‘What has happened? Is she alive?’

‘Of course I’m alive, Daisy,’ Clio said, recovering her spirit. ‘And quite why the duke feels the need to carry me, I have yet to decide. Put me down, your grace, if you please.’

Chuckling, Ezra did as he was asked, but held her upper arm until he was sure she was steady on her feet.

‘Your face!’ Ezra was appalled when he noticed the redness and swelling to one cheek. ‘The blaggard struck you?’ He picked up one of her hands and examined the chafing on her wrist, aware that similar injuries had been inflicted by the ropes tied to her ankles. ‘He will pay a heavy price for that,’ he said, anger surging through him.

‘Shush, it’s all right. I am alive. Fetch some hot water, Daisy, and I will soon be as right as rain.’

‘I will leave you in your maid’s capable hands and deal with Barnes,’ Ezra said.

‘He is obviously the assassin,’ Clio said, once her maid had left the room and was out of earshot. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘No more do I, but he made a mistake. Your reticule was in my mother’s carriage. She said you left it there when she took you to the luncheon, but I saw you with it…’

‘I realised someone connected to your mother had abducted me, but it wasn’t her. Barnes was acting alone. At least I didn’t hear him speak to anyone else. He thought I was unconscious, you see, and I decided it would be better if I remained that way for as long as possible. I thought I might hear something useful if he assumed I was out of my senses, but he didn’t speak a word.’

‘I have received a message to meet him behind the stables in half an hour if I wish to see you alive again. Of course, he doesn’t realise I know his identity.’

‘Then we shall meet him together,’ Clio replied, straightening her shoulders and almost toppling over.

‘You can barely stand up,’ Ezra replied, leading her to a chair.

‘Don’t you dare patronise me!’ Ezra had never admired her more. Despite being battered and bruised and scared half out of her wits, the light of battle burned in her eyes and she was still determined to fight back. ‘Not after all I have been through.’

‘I am trying to keep you safe!’ Ezra cried. ‘Don’t you think I already blame myself for what you have been through? This is not your fight, and yet you have been dragged into it and abused in a horrifying manner.’

‘Barnes might check on Miss Benton before going to the meeting,’ Godfrey pointed out. He had been standing quietly at the back of the room with Merlin and Ezra had forgotten he was there. ‘In which case…’

‘In which case he will know that the game is up,’ Ezra replied with a grim nod. ‘He ought to be in the stables, grooming the horses after their soaking and washing the carriage down. It will look odd if he is not, and draw attention to his absence.’

‘We know he has been very careful not to alter his routine,’ Godfrey said.

‘Do we? We hadn’t given any thought to the possibility of his involvement.’

‘Which is why he has been so clever,’ Clio said.

‘I agree. Go to the stables and make sure he’s there, Godfrey. If he’s found Miss Benton gone then his thoughts will turn to self-preservation and he will attempt to scarper, but we have unfinished business and I am not ready to let him escape.’ Ezra flexed his hands. ‘I have a score to settle with the arrogant cove.’

Godfrey acknowledged his orders and left the room.

‘What about me?’ Clio protested.

Ezra crouched in front of her and took her hand, running his fingers gently down the length of hers. ‘Stay here and let your maid take care of you. You can barely stand and I don’t want to put you in danger for a second time. God alone knows, when I think what could have happened to you, what he could have done to you out of spite, or whatever else it is that drives him, I feel ready to commit a few murders of my own. You are clearly not well enough to go down this evening, but I will return and tell you what I have discovered just as soon as I have had it out with Barnes.’

‘Don’t kill him,’ Clio replied, grasping his hand when he attempted to reclaim it. ‘That would make you no better than him. Hand him over to the authorities and let the law take its course.’

‘Very well, but only to oblige you.’ He sent her a sensual smile.

‘But I cannot guarantee that he will look quite as pretty as he does now by the time he is incarcerated. I cannot abide men who hit women.’

‘Surely your first cause for hatred is his propensity for murdering your own family.’

‘Perhaps it ought to be,’ he replied, squeezing her fingers and rising to his feet when her maid returned. ‘Make sure your mistress is comfortable and do not allow her to leave this room under any circumstances until I return,’ he instructed.

Daisy looked flustered but agreed. Clio looked furious.

‘I shall do as I please,’ she snapped.

Ezra laughed. ‘Defy me, my sweet, and you will not like the consequences.’

He left the room to the sound of her grunt of indignation ringing in his ears. There were still ten minutes before he needed to keep his engagement with his mother’s perfidious groom and so he stopped by the duchess’s room.

‘Did you find her?’ his mother asked, looking genuinely distressed.

‘She is safe.’

‘Thank God! What happened to her?’

‘What can you tell me about Barnes? How did he come to be in your service?’

‘Barnes?’ She seemed surprised by the question. ‘What is he to do with anything?’

‘Just answer the question, Mother. I am short of time.’

‘Well, your father engaged his services about five years ago. Seemed to think highly of him. I inherited Barnes when my old driver retired. That’s all I can tell you. I don’t know anything about his personal circumstances since I do not make a habit out of fraternizing with the hired help, but I can tell you that he has given exemplary service and I have had no reason to complain.’

‘Very well. Thank you. I will explain everything later but for now, oblige me by remaining in the house tonight. There is some small danger, so please resist the urge to make any trysts with Mr Brennan.’

His mother’s shoulders rippled with indignation and he expected a disdainful response. ‘Very well,’ she surprised him by saying instead, ‘but I shall hold you to your promise of an explanation.’

Satisfied that both his mother and Clio were safely out of Barnes’s reach, Ezra returned to his room to await Godfrey’s report. He didn’t

imagine that Barnes would attempt to harm either of them. Even so, he knew nothing about the man's motives and wasn't prepared to take further chances with the life of his one remaining relative, nor with that of the female who was coming to mean so much to him and for whose protection he felt a burden of responsibility that he would never cede to another.

Ezra had paced the room a dozen times without managing to make sense of Barnes's motives by the time Godfrey returned.

'He's right where he's supposed to be, but finishing up,' he reported. 'He won't have time to check on Miss Benton if he intends to be on time but it won't occur to him that she might have been found, so I doubt whether he'll make himself late by bothering.'

'Right.' Ezra firmed his jaw. 'Let's get to the meeting place then. A confrontation is long overdue.'

The two men strode side by side from the house and situated themselves in the orchard behind the stables as twilight gave way to a darkening sky and the sun, such as it was, finally set. An owl hooted and the sound of the horses in the stables nearby, shuffling their feet as they consumed their hay, reached Ezra's ears. He remained alert and resolute when they heard Barnes's footsteps approaching.

'There you are, Barnes,' Ezra said, almost choking with the effort it took him to speak affably.

'I told you to come al…' He stopped dead in his tracks and looked as though he was about to reach for a weapon. 'How did you know?'

'That it was you?' Ezra stepped forward, a good half-a-head taller than the muscular groom. He reached out and relieved him of the dagger he had just withdrawn from his boot. 'You are not as clever as you think you are.'

'And you will never see your doxy again now that you've declined to obey simple instructions.'

'If by doxy you are referring to me, then you quite mistake the matter.'

Ezra groaned inwardly as Clio wandered into sight, impeccably attired, her sore wrists hidden by the lace cuffs that hung over her hands. The injury to her face wasn't visible in the semi-darkness either. Ezra expected Barnes to capitulate, but instead he appeared ready to fight. Ezra moved to stand beside and slightly in front of Clio, frowning at her as he attempted to protect her person from Barnes's line of sight.

'We are most interested to know why you felt it necessary to kill off the duke's family,' Clio said conversationally, 'and to drag me into

the affair, for that matter. It seems to me that they provided you with a comfortable position. There is a certain cachet attaching to a man who can claim to drive for a duchess, one assumes.'

A rumbling growl echoed in the back of Merlin's throat. Barnes stared at the dog, who had also taken up a position in protection of Clio, and Ezra wondered if he would attempt to run. Or to fight. Instead, he did the last thing that Ezra had expected and threw back his head and laughed.

'You have absolutely no idea who I am, do you, little brother?'

'Brother? What are you talking…?' Ezra paused mid-sentence. 'You are one of the pater's by-blows, I assume, and have developed ideas above your station.'

'You assume rightly,' Barnes said. '*Our* father acknowledged myself and my siblings as his offspring but did precious little else for us.'

The cogs turned in Ezra's brain and everything fell neatly into place. 'If we were all dead then you would have a claim on the pater's personal estate,' he said.

Barnes clapped in a sarcastic manner. 'And they say the aristocracy don't have two brain cells to rub together.'

'I rather think it's the opposite way round,' Ezra said calmly.

'I beg to differ. No one had the least idea that our father's death was a result of anything other than natural causes. You were away playing at soldiers at the time, and our dear brother Richard was so keen to step into the old man's shoes that he had him six feet under in the blink of an eye. Far too quickly for any questions to be asked.'

'And then you killed him, too.'

'Didn't intend to, not so soon after the old man, in case questions were asked. But he caught me going through the duke's papers one day and I had to admit to my identity. I suggested that if he saw me right, as he had a duty to do, I would quietly go away.' He gave a gruff laugh. 'The arrogant fool tried to dismiss me for my insolence! Instead, he signed his own death warrant and no one suspected a thing.'

'Why did my father give you employment?'

'Because I went to him cap in hand, all obedience and willingness to oblige. He used to lap it up when people grovelled. His mistake was in acknowledging us and then leaving us to our own devices once our mother died. If it became public knowledge, it would have made him look unfeeling and we both know how self-aware, how conscious of his precious reputation he was. He couldn't deny the connection

because he is named on our birth certificates and he would have disliked it if I'd created a scandal. I have a way with horses, so he gave me a senior position in return for my silence, and expected me to be grateful.'

'But that wasn't enough for you and you saw an opportunity to feather your own nest. Having killed my father and brother, you assumed the war would do for me. When it did not, you had already developed a taste for murder and decided to see me off,' Ezra said.

'I was willing to bide my time, to work on the old lady first and see if we could reach an accommodation. After all, I knew all about her trysts with Brennan and she wouldn't want them to be made public knowledge. But then we came here and I could see which way the wind blew,' he said, fixing Clio with a significant glance. 'I couldn't risk the possibility of a quick marriage that might produce a legitimate heir, not after all the trouble I'd taken. You must see that.'

'So you went back to the picnic,' Ezra said.

'I did, once the duchess was tucked away with Brennan. I knew she wouldn't want me for ages. I intended to take a shot at you and then disappear again,' he added, glaring at Ezra. 'Since I wasn't there and the duchess would have to confirm the fact if necessary, there was no danger of any fingers being pointed in my direction. Then that blasted storm caused chaos and I had to think on my feet.' He shrugged, sounding pleased with himself. 'The enticing Miss Benton appeared in front of my eyes and it seemed like providence. So…' He spread his hands. 'And I would have got away with it. Us servants are invisible to you lot.'

'Not so very invisible. You will answer for your crimes in a court of law and pay the ultimate price.'

'Nah!' He flapped a dismissive hand, still supremely self-confident. 'You won't do that and risk your family's scandals being played out in public.'

That assumption explained why he'd been so willing to boast about his crimes when Ezra couldn't actually prove that he had done anything other than abduct Clio.

'You mistake me for my father,' he replied calmly.

'No, listen, we can work this out, I am absolutely sure of it,' Barnes said, showing the first signs of alarm when he realised that Ezra could not be swayed.

Barnes moved with astonishing agility and made a grab for Clio. Before he could touch her, Merlin sprang into action and sank his teeth into Barnes's outstretched hand, causing the man to howl with

pain.

Ezra called Merlin off, then turned to face Barnes. ‘This is for presuming to lay a finger on Miss Benton,’ he said. He drew back his fist and punched Barnes squarely on the nose, sending him toppling to the floor to the accompaniment of the sound of crunching bone as blood spurted from his broken nose.

‘Pick him up, lock him in the cellar and send for the local magistrate,’ Ezra said, flexing his hand and using the uninjured one to take Clio’s arm and escort her back to the house.



Chapter Eighteen

Clio woke the following morning, feeling battered and bruised yet highly relieved. Relieved that Ezra's life had been spared and the mystery solved. She was also glad that Salford had not been guilty of anything worse than courting her for her fortune. He was a conniving and unpleasant man, but she had found it difficult to believe him capable of murder or of being patient enough to develop such a convoluted plan. Had the situation gone in his favour, she imagined that she would have endured a long and unhappy marriage to a man who squandered her wealth upon his mistress, Lady Walder. She shuddered at the prospect.

'You should rest this morning, miss, after your ordeal,' Daisy said stubbornly, fussing around Clio when she insisted upon dressing. 'The duke was most particular on the point.'

'The duke does not tell me what to do.'

'Everyone below stairs and in the drawing room, I hear, wondered where you were last night. And why the duke had bruised knuckles. I didn't know what to say to all the questions put to me.'

'I hope you said nothing.'

'Mr Godfrey frowned at anyone who dared to persist,' Daisy replied, giggling. 'I just said that you were not feeling well, but not why. Even so, I am that worried about you, miss. You could have been murdered, or worse.'

Clio smiled, wondering what could possibly be a worse fate than death in Daisy's vivid imagination. It didn't take her long, and she admitted that her maid could well have been correct. She also knew that Daisy must be burning with curiosity. Mr Godfrey might have dropped a few hints, but no matter how fond he was of Daisy, his loyalty lay with Ezra and he would not have told her the complete

truth.

'What time is it?' Clio asked.

'Almost noon, miss.'

'Good heavens, why did you let me sleep for so long? I never sleep so late, as well you know.'

'The duke said I was not to—'

'I don't want to hear it, Daisy. You are in my employment, not the duke's.'

'We only want what is best for you, miss,' Daisy said, causing Clio to regret her strident tone.

'I know you do, Daisy, and I thank you for it, but neither the duke nor any other man will tell me what to do.' She pushed aside her half-eaten breakfast and stood. 'I shall take a walk in the gardens.'

'Do you think you should? You took a bump to the head, and heads are funny things. There's no telling what they might do when they've been bumped. My old nan took a tumble and wandered naked through the village at midnight not long after. It caused quite a scandal.'

Clio assured Daisy that she had every intention of keeping her clothes on. 'I shall not go far or be long,' she added.

'Would you like me to come with you, miss, just in case you come over all queer?'

'Thank you, Daisy, but I am sure I shall be fine.'

Clio didn't feel fine, but she would not have made that admission for any consideration. She hoped that fresh air, solitude and the opportunity to think would clear her head and restore her sense of reason. So much had happened so quickly but at least Ezra's life was no longer under threat, and for that she felt a huge sense of relief. The feelings that she had developed for him were of no consequence. She would no doubt recover the moment he left her aunt's estate, common sense would be restored to her and she would be herself again.

She had wondered, given the ferocity of his protective instincts, the fact that he had kissed her and actively seemed to seek out her company, whether Ezra returned her feelings in some small capacity but dismissed the possibility out of hand. She was too young and not nearly well enough born to hold his interest. He had claimed to have no interest in Lady Walder, but she had observed them together and it had been clear that he was drawn to the more mature and more experienced female.

'I should have known that you wouldn't obey orders.'

Clio was startled out of her reverie, her abiding regret, by the deep, gravelly sound of Ezra's voice.

'Whose orders?' she asked, feigning annoyance at the interruption and devoting her attention to Merlin, who gambolled up to her on ungainly legs, demanding to be petted. 'I do not answer to anyone in this house other than my aunt.'

'I have sent Salford away with a flea in his ear. He will not bother you again,' Ezra replied, falling into step with her.

'You needn't have done that. I am surprised that he went, though. The arrogant man seemed to think that he would be able to persuade me to marry him.'

'I assured him differently.'

Clio glanced up at him. 'Whatever could you have said to him, you of all people? I know you do not like one another and so anything you tell him to do is likely to result in the opposite…well, result.'

'Lady Walder has left too. She has given up on me and Salford has taken the opportunity to console her.'

'You are talking in riddles.' Tiring, Clio lowered herself onto a garden bench and Ezra sat beside her. 'Have the goodness to explain yourself.'

'I simply pointed out to Lady Walder that her pursuit of me was futile. I might also have mentioned that I was aware of her taking an assumed name and meeting Brennan here in the local tavern.'

'We still do not know why she did that. But anyway, they are both free agents. Why should it matter?'

'It matters because Brennan had encouraged her to think he could persuade my mother to give her approval to our marrying—Lady Walder and me, that is. She just admitted as much.'

Clio raised a brow. 'Good heavens.'

'It seems that Brennan is actually rather fond of my mother and wanted to somehow prove to me that it was not only her status and fortune that attracted him. He has been pressing her to marry him but she wouldn't make the commitment without my approval, which she hadn't found the courage to request, or even to mention to me.'

'That is because we are all terrified of you.'

Ezra laughed and squeezed her hand. 'So my mother just told me. Anyway, Lady Walder assured Brennan that she would influence me in his favour if he did the same thing for her by gaining my mother's backing.'

'Then she is very stupid, exceedingly desperate or she does not

understand your character at all. Perhaps a little of all three. You and I are barely acquainted and yet I am well aware that no one can influence you once you have set your mind upon something.'

'Of course,' he said into the ensuing silence, 'there was another reason why Salford left in such a tearing hurry.'

'Oh, and what would that be?'

'I might have left him with the impression that you are already spoken for.'

'But I am not, and what's more, I don't need your assistance to fend off his unwelcome advances.'

'Sweet Clio,' he said, tutting and shaking his head. 'Tell me you don't feel it too.'

'Feel what?' She sent him a soulful look. 'You do so enjoy talking in riddles and naturally, as a feeble female, I am quite incapable of following your train of thought.'

Ezra picked up her hand and kissed the back of it. 'I rather hoped that you would consider committing yourself to me for…oh, let's say the rest of your life.'

Her brows shot upwards. 'Are you proposing to me, your grace?'

'Very ineptly, it seems, if there is any doubt about the matter. Many alliances have been made this week. My friend Henry, impulsive fool that he is, assures me that he is about to offer to make an honest woman of your cousin Adele. Beth, who expressed such fear of me, is now happily fending off the advances of a considerable number of gentlemen, and Salford and Lady Walder have accepted that they have risen as far as they are likely to and settled for each other. I feel rather left out, I have to admit—especially as I believe the whole purpose of this rather tiresome affair was for me to select a wife. So yes, sweet Clio, I am proposing to you.'

'Aren't you supposed to go down on bended knee? Not that it would do you any good. I am far too young for you, and probably too outspoken, too opinionated, too argumentative, too…too everything really, but I enjoy being too everything and I don't have the slightest intention of changing my ways.'

'I did dismiss my feelings for you, which I have harboured since first making your acquaintance, on the grounds of your youth and obvious unsuitability,' he added whimsically. 'But your courage, your willingness to disagree with me if you think I am wrong, your quick-wittedness, and more than anything else your willingness to risk your own life in the protection of mine has taught me a lesson in humility. I love you, Clio, rather passionately as it happens,' he added, slipping

from the bench and onto one knee. ‘Please do me the honour of agreeing to become my duchess. If you do you can be sure that I will dedicate the rest of my life to your safety and happiness.’

‘Goodness,’ she said, swallowing twice. ‘I suppose I must say yes since you put it like that. But what of your mother? Will she approve?’

‘I wouldn’t care if she did not, but as it happens I spent the last hour in conversation with her. She had absolutely no idea who Barnes was or what he had done to the pater and Richard.’

‘She must be severely shocked.’

‘She is, but she will recover. She’s made of strong stuff. She told me a lot of things that I think she has already told you. I was never more surprised, but it has broken down barriers between us that I thought were impenetrable. If she really wants Brennan I shall not raise objections, especially if I have your concerns to occupy me. I have a feeling that you will not make a biddable wife, and I do so enjoy a challenge.’

‘Beware of what you wish for, your grace.’ She tugged at his hand until he got up from the ground and resumed his seat beside her. ‘As it happens, I am rather fond of you as well, annoyingly dictatorial though you often are.’

‘I will never apologise for trying to keep you safe, my sweet,’ he replied passionately, cupping her face in his hand.

‘Nor I you,’ she replied, leaning forward to softly cover his lips with her own. ‘And since you can be, if you will excuse me for remarking upon it, a little rash at times, I had best marry you in order to keep you out of mischief.’ She paused. ‘To say nothing of protecting you from the advances of the Lady Walders of this world.’

‘My love!’ he cried, pulling her into his arms and kissing her soundly.

The End

About the Author

Hi, I do hope you enjoyed **Fit for a Duke**. If so, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. I'd love to hear what you thought of this particular novel – what you enjoyed most about it and what you didn't like. Constructive criticism is always welcome.

Reach me at wendysoliman@rocketmail.com

I'm a British author, brought up on the Isle of Wight and share my life with a handsome rescued Spanish Podenco called Markos.

I've had over one hundred books published, ranging from Regency romance, (my first love), to contemporary women's fiction and marine crime mysteries.

When not writing I walk miles, make half-hearted attempts to retain flexibility by attending yoga classes, read other people's tomes…oh, and I'm on a one woman mission to keep the wine trade profitable!

Check out all of my books, and learn more about me from my website: http:www.wendysoliman.com

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